

ALL ABOUT

MENTORING

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For Morris Keeton

At our 1984 All College Meeting, Empire State College honored Dr. Morris Keeton with a Doctor of Humane Letters. The citation concluded: "While some teachers saw the classroom as their world, you saw the world as a classroom. Today experiential learning extends richer educational opportunities to people of all ages and backgrounds because you perceived the promise in such learning and worked to see it fulfilled."

Keeton, the founding president of CAEL (now The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning), spent 30 years at Antioch College and, in the 1990s, was senior scholar at the Institute for Research and Assessment in Higher Education at University of Maryland University College. He is the author of many books (including *Learning from Experience*, 1987; *Employability in a High-Performance Economy* [with Sheckley and Lamdin], 1992; and *Effectiveness and Efficiency in Higher Education for Adults* [with Sheckley and Griggs], 2002). In all of these writings and in an extraordinary professional life, Keeton has continued to push us to grapple with the most basic questions about who can learn, where and when learning takes place, and (as he put it) "What is a college education? What for?"

In this issue of *All About Mentoring*, now a quarter-century after his honorary doctorate was awarded, we return to some of the themes, questions and problems that Morris Keeton has encouraged us to take on, especially those related to college credit for experiential learning. As Keeton said in receiving his award: "The 'ivory tower' and the 'ivied walls' used to be awe-inspiring symbols. So they were in the community of my childhood. Who today thinks that a monastic setting or a rural enclave is the most productive site for scholarly research and student development? Yet even though our old images of where best to learn are crumbling, we cling to the idea that the norm for the places for advanced learning is the campus cluster of classroom buildings, laboratories, libraries and faculty offices."

We, again, thank Morris Keeton for continuing to remind us of what we "cling to" and what new "symbols" of learning we need to nourish.



Morris Keeton with Pamela Tate, president and CEO (left) and Diana Bamford Rees, associate vice president (right) of CAEL.

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Credit by Evaluation: Only Half the Story

Our history is rich. Empire State College was part of a burst of critical pedagogy, part of a powerful social movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, which tried to do two things: it wanted to push the academy to recognize its deep ties to destructive social and economic practices of all kinds (for example, to vast inequalities of race, class, gender and age; to a colonial war thousands of miles away). And, at the same time, it sought to experiment with new forms of education that could re-imagine and, in so doing, re-invent what we assumed teaching and learning could be. Our legacy is one of criticism and change.

One essential element of this history was the recognition that students – adult learners of all kinds – come to university with enormously complex lives, with job histories, with connections to their communities, with skills gained on the streets, in basements and kitchens, on shop floors and with neighbors. That is, students themselves come to us with ideas, competencies, understandings and often keen insights gained far from the walls of the academy. This was indeed a radical

claim, especially because it threw into question the sacred belief that all knowledge worth knowing was born in and the property of the university.

So when in 1974, Empire State College, along with representatives from New College of the University of Alabama, Thomas Edison State College, Framingham State College, Antioch College, Florida International University, San Francisco State College, El Paso Community College and Minnesota Metropolitan University founded the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL), which became the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning, which became the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, these social reformers – gently guided by Morris Keeton (who was then provost and vice president at Antioch), experience came front and center.

From its beginnings, Empire State College embraced experiential learning through its commitment to “credit by evaluation.” Others institutions (indeed, *many* other institutions) came to this belief either because they knew it was only fair to acknowledge that learning could be gained just about anywhere, or because the adult market was just too sweet to pass up. But Empire State College (along with those early CAEL institutions) was out ahead: prior experiential learning was serious learning; it didn’t even have to be evaluated through standardized examinations, nor did students have to twist their knowledge into the pre-fab boxes of already existing courses. A portfolio of prior learning became the usually not so neat, time-consuming, expensive, but often so fascinating place that a student could tell us what he/she had learned.

But there’s more. When, 40 years ago, Morris Keeton and others argued that higher learning had neglected experience, had truly misunderstood that the experiential was at the heart of all learning, he was not only urging us to take seriously what students had learned in the *past*. He wanted us to reconsider how we taught and how students learned in the *present*. In effect, prior learning was only half the story. A true learning revolution meant that

institutions would have to experiment with pedagogical practices, try out new ways to engage students, set them off to work with problems and on projects to see and question (opportunities to be found literally anywhere and everywhere) that could help them grapple with issues and play with ideas. In effect: forget the authority of the expert lecturer (no matter how smart), the traditional reading list (no matter how savvy), and the final exam (no matter how “objective”).

And here’s where the learning contract comes in. In important ways, its promise was that previously unimagined “learning activities” could become the heart of new experiential learning. Instead of lectures, why not have conversations, and not only between a student and a professor, but between a student and other informants inside or outside the academy? Instead of a meticulously constructed bibliography, why not let the students pursue questions about their experiences that could lead to a search for a wild range of resources – people, books, observations and practices of all kinds? And instead of exams, why not let students have the opportunity to present their own work in their own ways and to discuss it seriously with their mentors? Isn’t this a better, a more authentic way to see what a student has actually learned? Indeed, this was the vision of a new university truly without walls. And how interesting: the prior learning portfolio and the learning contract were to be tied at the experiential hip.

So what happened? It seems to me that we got scared. Empire State College and the other CAEL institutions had taken a big risk in championing the portfolio and claiming that a student’s *past* experiential learning could have the intellectual weight of a college course. Could we experiment with *new* experiential learning at the same time, listening to student questions, pushing them out into the world, and creating new studies at every turn? But if we did, wouldn’t we have to surrender our cherished faculty authority? What academic standards could we use? What would happen to quality? In taking up this experiential adventure that could throw wide open the world of learning, wouldn’t we just lose control?

What, we worried, if a student had never learned theory? What, others argued, if a student lacked scholarly concepts or hadn't read this or that? What if a student, regardless of the depth of his/her past practices in the community, in business, in the painting studio or dance space, had no sense at all of the academic context in which that learning needed to be placed, let alone was able to informatively write about it? We just couldn't take those chances. Our academic legitimacy was at stake. Of course, then, yes, of course, the learning contract would have to at least approximate what students might find in any good course.

It may be that in the early years of the college, experiential learning was taken

as seriously as the starting point for new study-construction as it was for recognizing college-level past learning. But even if this were the case, it's my sense that pretty soon, our concerns shifted: we started debating about whether a learning contract was "canned" (that is, before doc-pak-"libraries" took hold, pulled, intact, right from the mentor's desk) or whether it was sufficiently "individualized." However, whichever it was (probably, I'd argue, in most cases, it was a little bit of both), the learning contract's real experiential edge was pretty dull, and remains so right now. That is, I'd bet that today, most learning contracts are filled with book titles, scholarly research projects and other quite academically proper writing assignments.

I wonder if we have a chance to resuscitate the experiential spirit of the learning contract and thus remember the *whole* story? Such discussion and experimentation seem far from our current institutional priorities in which even the language of "learning contract" has slipped into talk of "courses." But if we returned to what people like Keeton wanted us so much to see about the limits of *any* kind of learning, we also might be more willing to wonder about what an institution very much in the world and dedicated to criticism and change might look like today.

Alan Mandell

*Are you experienced?
Ah, have you ever been experienced?
Well I have*

– J. Hendrix, "Are you Experienced" (1967)

A Learning Experience with Rural Teachers in Argentina

Silvia Chelala, Long Island Center and Center for International Programs

In the winter of 2007, I was approached with an unusual offer from the director of outreach, Dr. Adriana Corda, from the National University of Tucumán, Argentina (my *alma mater*). Together with the director of alumni activities, they were thinking of developing a program designed to improve the skills of middle school teachers in Tucumán, located in the Northwest of Argentina. They were interested in knowing if I would be willing to conduct some activities in the program called *Maestro 1, 2, 3 (Qué es el Proyecto Maestro)* aimed at improving the skills of teachers

working in marginal rural areas in the province. I was intrigued. Teachers working in those areas have traditionally been ignored by faculty development activities. It was an interesting challenge for me, since it would allow to me teach at the university from which I had graduated and thus repay in part the education that had been generously given to me, since tuition at state universities in my country had been free when I attended.

I had long been meeting with people from the university on my yearly trips to see my family, but I had no idea what the result of that conversation with those officials of the National University would be. The situation evoked conflicting emotions. In a way, it was going back to a place and some of the people from my student days. But I also felt that my life and experiences abroad had



Meeting with colleagues

changed me considerably, so I was not sure how I would fit in again to an environment that was not mine anymore. I was intrigued and excited about this challenge.

I started thinking about what I could offer them. I realized that I had been involved in working with narratives of one sort or another since graduate school. I began looking into oral histories since I had done extensive interviews with subjects for my qualitative study on text construction that became my graduate thesis. My Empire State College colleagues, John Andrejack, Amy Ruth Tobol, Yvonne Murphy and KD Eaglefeathers were of great help with suggestions, and Amy Ruth recommended a book that gave me the tools to think about oral histories in a new way (Yow, 2005). I also looked at what I do with students in one of my Empire

State College study groups on Personal Writing: Autobiographies, Memoirs and Testimonies. In my attempts to prepare for my trip, tape recorders became an issue. I made a plea to my Long Island colleagues and Barbara Kantz came up with three machines. Those, plus some I had obtained from other sources, became my stash. Some of my friends raised the issue that airport security could be suspicious about someone setting out to travel carrying multiple tape recorders, so I decided that I could send them along in my checked luggage. Mel Rosenthal gave me a useful introduction to digital cameras. I was all set to document the experience. There is nothing that replaces our spirit of cooperation in the Empire State College community.

And then, nothing happened for three months.

Being realistic, I knew that projects can be derailed through bureaucracy so, in the middle of June, I sent an e-mail to follow up. I got an answer: it had taken the officials until the end of May to obtain approval from the local ministry of education so that teachers could attend the workshops. We firmed up dates, and I got an invitation. At the end of July, I left for Argentina.

The preliminary idea was that I was to conduct some sessions in the province's capital city of Tucumán. Teachers from rural areas were to come to the city for the training. My proposal for the content of the workshop with bibliography and a list of activities had been approved. My host was concerned that we would not have many participants as this was a new program – she predicted maybe five. However, because of a strike by administrative workers at the university, I only had one student for the initial session. Although my disappointment was great, even greater was my hosts' who wanted this kind of workshop to be used as a model for further activities.

Undaunted, the organizers of the workshops made several calls. They spoke to school principals and people in the ministry. Finally, when I had lost all hope, I was invited to address a group of rural teachers who were in the city for another training. I

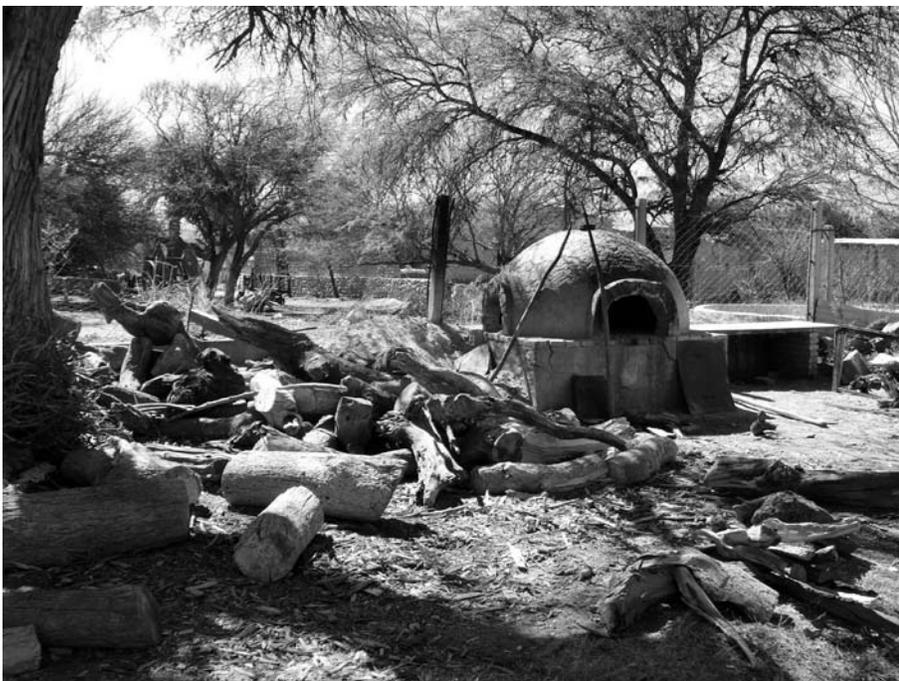


Library and kindergarten in village school

asked them if they would be interested in what I had to offer them. They were very interested, particularly if it could be done in two instead of 10 days, since for them it was rather difficult to devote such a long time to a course. Here is where my training at Empire State College came into full swing. I went home, restructured the material I had prepared, added, pruned,

made a great number of Xerox copies and was ready for the new workshop in just two days. It was designed for two, eight-hour days as the ministry regulations required.

The first group did not have five participants; it had 50! Although some of them live near the rural school where they teach, for many others travel is extremely hard. After traveling by bus to a small village near the school, they have to travel on horseback for several hours through mountains and rivers to reach the school. Therefore, they live there. They go home about once every month during the school year. In many schools, children who live several miles away, live in the school buildings with the teachers. These teachers cook for them, bathe them, take care of them when sick, as well as teach them and help them with homework. Men and women live in dormitory-type rooms with shared facilities in very basic conditions. Art and science teachers in particular may be itinerant. They rotate and teach in a school for a week before moving on to the next one. These professionals may work in up to four schools. Because of distance and cost, rural teachers have very few opportunities to attend faculty development workshops or courses. These development activities are very important as they are assigned “value points” by the ministry, which, in turn,



Outdoor bread oven



School in Colalao del Valle with the motto: Educating for Freedom

teachers need in order to secure permanent jobs and obtain better pay. Even facing such impediments, these teachers are happy to work with the students they have, for whom they show real concern and interest.

We had a wonderful time. We read an autobiographical account by a Cuban slave (*Autobiografía de un esclavo* by Juan Francisco Manzano) and excerpts from Pablo Neruda's autobiography (*Confieso que he vivido*). We discussed literary issues of the genre. Then we proceeded to discuss oral histories: theory, methodology,

types and ethical concerns. I shared some questionnaires and we looked at samples of what some schools in the United States have done to preserve traditions by involving school children in interviewing community members (*Huellas del Pasado, Footprints from the Past*).

As *Maestro 1, 2, 3* had been designed as a three-year project, the district supervisor, who also participated in our workshop, thought that a research project by each school would be a good activity for the teachers at the start of their academic year.

After discussing quantitative and qualitative research, the group split into smaller groups by school and generated a question or topic that their school would investigate in 2007 - 2008. The topics were varied, but one great advantage was that some schools had their principals already participating, so the support was built in. All projects were tied to needs

in their communities. All involved intensive interviews by the children. Some examples of the topics included: investigating the possibility of an after school program so that children with untapped talents could be tutored by the teachers; designing a small museum of rocks and plants in the area and having children study them; investigating the use of medicinal plants in their community; looking into the issue of water pollution of mountain rivers which are used for washing, drinking and waste removal; and recording the history and process of a ritual by which a bull and a cow are "married" in the spring as a fertility ritual. The supervisor offered his project: from his post, he would support individual school efforts in their proposed research. Teachers filled out evaluations of the workshop and a short paragraph on how they see themselves as professionals and what it means to them to work in such isolated places.

While I was involved in this endeavor, I was asked if I would offer the course in a mountain area called the Calchaqui Valleys. There I could work with other rural teachers who could not come to the city for professional development. I accepted. Again, my experience at Empire State College came in very handy. The town where I would deliver the workshop, Colalao del Valle, is at approximately 5,955 feet above sea level. This village is about a four and a half hour bus ride from Tucumán. The university had never "gone out" to meet the students before; it had always expected students to travel. The shift was very rewarding for the students as well as for me. It was decided, then, that I would travel to their area and conduct approximately the same workshop as I had facilitated in the city.

One of the school principals went with me. We were very involved in a conversation about the meaning of education for the Argentina of today when I started to feel sick. The bus was climbing a winding road up the mountain and the height was affecting me. When I could not hold out any longer, my companion asked the driver to stop the bus so that I could get out and get a breath of fresh air. He readily agreed. When I felt better, we proceeded to the next town where I was served a tea made with coca leaves, a popular medicine in high altitude places. I felt well taken care of.



Lunch-time: members of the course



Birth of a musical instrument

Our destination was Colalao del Valle, which means “the town of the chief” or cacique in the indigenous quichua language. It is a sleepy village considered the center of the Calchaqui Valley. It was founded in the 18th century when Spanish families moved there after the Spanish conquest of those regions from the indigenous populations. At the end of the 19th century, it became a summer place because of its dry weather. The main activities of this area are the production of walnuts, spices, folk art and home-made wines. It is in a corner of Tucumán province close to Salta and Catamarca, in the northwest part of the country. Staying there was a trip into the past. There are no restaurants except a bar where I went with the principal for dinner the first night. There is one telephone (which does not work most of the time) and one bakery that sells the most delicious white and whole wheat breads. There are no paved streets except the four blocks around the plaza and the main road. There is only one hotel, where I stayed.

Everything had been arranged for my meeting with workshop participants the next day in the only school, conveniently located across the road from my hotel. This group of about 35 participants was different than what I had experienced in the city. Their needs were slightly more focused on the issues of retaining oral traditions. They



Vineyards in village

themselves were predominantly members of indigenous groups and so were their students. Their ties to the community were strong.

With this group I used more or less the same content as with the last group, but concentrated more closely on the methodology of oral history, having them interview each other, transcribe tapes and make oral presentations of what they had learned. Meetings also started at 8 a.m. but we broke at 10 a.m. for coffee and at noon for lunch. We all ate together at a long table, elegantly set by the cook and her help. We all contributed to the expense of the food. The atmosphere was festive with jokes flying around and people sitting with friends and colleagues. My desk in a corner of one of the rooms had a small glass with flowers from the garden. Here the teachers were happy to get a bibliography and the same sample work of community documenting projects (*Huellas del Pasado*, *Footprints from the Past*) just like the first group. Some would have wanted more academic training in oral history, but with a varied audience and only two days together, that would have been difficult. Their projects focused on how they could use interviews and oral histories in their classrooms and for community needs.

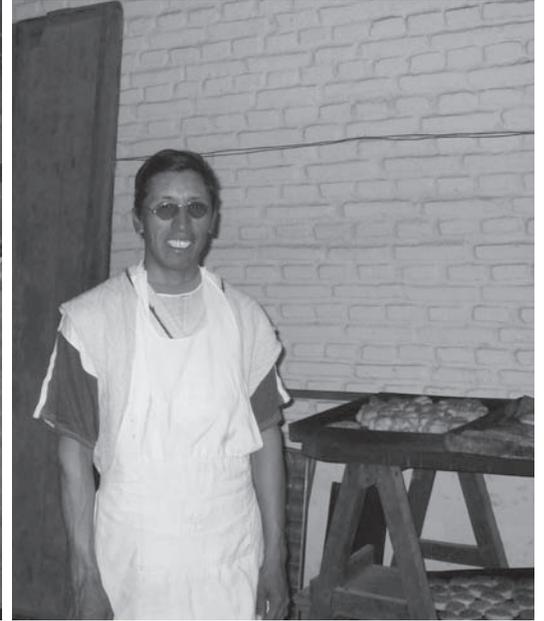
In terms of material resources, this school in Colalao del Valle had all the

basic requirements. It had a simple but new building, painted and finished by parents, students and teachers. It had 12 computers, but no access to the Internet (because there are no telephone lines in the village aside from one public phone). It had tape recorders and a video player. It had clean facilities, a place for children to play basketball, a small vineyard and a classroom where children learned how to make wine, bake bread (in a mud oven) and make musical instruments. It had an entire small building dedicated to the library. The principal was finishing his doctorate in education and he was energetic, resourceful and a good supervisor, according to the teachers. However, according to the participants, as far as facilities were concerned, this school was the exception.

As I sit and reflect on this experience, I can say that my work at Empire State College where we have to create new learning contracts on short notice for almost every student who sits with us, was one of the best trainings I could have had for this project. Our philosophy of taking the students at whatever stage they come and respecting their experiences and creating activities relevant to their life histories and interests and goals, allowed me to listen to participants’ needs and honor them. These teachers work under such different circumstances than we do, that it would



Traditional bread oven



Village baker

be difficult for us to imagine ourselves in those situations. But I had to try to imagine those circumstances and work within them in order to create something that might be relevant to them.

One of the issues that came up frequently in the teachers' descriptions of themselves as professionals was isolation. This sense of isolation springs from being in a rural area with limited contact with other people and isolated from the bureaucracy in the city. Another topic was marginalization of their students and of themselves as conveniently "out of sight, out of mind." Their lack of access to professional development not only makes teachers fall into ruts, but it also has financial repercussions. Not having access to these activities does not allow them to earn points needed for higher pay or more secure employment.

I had heard so many negative things about rural teachers before I went to Tucumán that I did not have high expectations of what was possible to do there. The teachers and everyone associated with the school proved me wrong. They had tertiary degrees, they loved their students, they had creativity, but some had lost it because the bureaucrats demanded accomplishment measures that were inappropriate for their students. They

reminded me that I should never pre-judge the quality or level of participation of a group. Although I was prepared to meet teachers who would be disinterested in change, for example, I found intellectually inquisitive minds ready for discussion. I learned that they were grateful that someone had taken the time to listen to them and to work with them in their communities. I learned that they were hungry for new information that was delivered "with clarity" – meaning without jargon. I learned about being accepted as a transitory member of their community, eating and joking with them, as well as working with them on serious academic subjects. I learned that although material resources are important, willingness to learn is even more important for vibrant schools.

In an important way, the sense of community to which I referred with respect to those Empire State College colleagues who helped me prepare for this project also was very prominent among teachers and school administrators with whom I worked in rural Argentina. The students at the workshops claimed that they learned a lot from me. But I consider the whole experience a gift that the university, the hosts, the teachers – my students – and school administrators gave to me.

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Experiencing Dewey on Experience: A Conversation

Xenia Coulter, Center for International Programs

Alan Mandell, Metropolitan Center and Adult Learning and Mentoring

Julie Shaw, Center for Distance Learning

Wayne Willis, Genesee Valley Center

Lucy Winner, Metropolitan Center

What follows is an edited version of a phone conversation that took place on April 9, 2008. Mentors Coulter, Mandell, Shaw, Willis and Winner examined John Dewey's thought through an interpretation of his seminal Experience and Education (1938). (All quotes below are from the 1963 Macmillan edition of Dewey's classic text.)

Mandell: Why don't we begin with Dewey's understanding of "experience"?

Willis: His focus on experience is consistent with his philosophy of progressive education. For him, one of the things that separate "traditional" and "progressive" education is this emphasis on beginning with experience. Traditional education is rooted in traditional ideas about appropriate subject matter and goals. Experience is at the core of his sense of what progressive education is about.

Coulter: Upon re-reading the book, I realized that what Dewey is writing about is not only starting with experience, but also creating new experiences from which learning takes place. That's the piece that we ignore with adult students. It's not a problem to start with experience, but it's quite difficult to think about how to *create* experiences in the ways in which he is imagining. It's the kind of thing that we don't like to do.

Mandell: He certainly assumes that there can be badly chosen experiences; there are "good" and more "problematic" educational experiences. It's not just *any* experience.

Coulter: For Dewey, "experience" is something that you do; it's something that is empirical – that sense-wise you experience.

It's not just something you think about. It's not just sitting in your office and talking.

Willis: But, of course, sitting in your office and talking with your student is an experience.

Mandell: Dewey is clear here: "It is not enough to insist on the necessity of experience, nor even of activity in experience. Everything depends on the *quality* of the experience which is had" (27).

Shaw: He talks about educative experience: all experiences lead to the control of future experiences. And that the quality of an educative experience is one that fits in with "progress" – it's about continuity, progress and growth; it's about purposes and the making of meaning.

Coulter: The teacher's role is to modify and modulate so that experiences go in the "correct" direction. It is not simply "planless improvisation."

Winner: Dewey thinks the teacher has a sense of where it's moving. That's where the teacher's "selecting" is so important. So it's different from saying that *after* an experience we try to figure out how to use the knowledge from that experience and transform it in some ways so that it is useful in another experience.

Shaw: So the educator has the sense of the continuum of the educative experience in the past and also into the future.

Mandell: Yes, it's a double thing – past and future. But, in addition, he continues to use phrases like "principles of growth;" he assumes that he knows what this "growth" is and the principles it's built on.

Coulter: So we have a plan in mind, a plan that might even be devised with the help of the students. But here's my question: Is this "a" plan with goals that can be established for a group of students. Or is he suggesting that there is a plan for *each* student because each student is different?

Willis: I would say that he is actually trying to think about both levels. There is that notion that you have to work with students to determine the interests and the purposes of their learning, and purposes need to be appropriate and authentic. At the same time,

... you have to work with students to determine the interests and the purposes of their learning, and purposes need to be appropriate and authentic.

he also is very critical of the way in which the progressive education of his time is only concerned with individuals. It can, from his view, become a kind of an anarchic mess. So he wants to try to coordinate the interests, the purposes and the goals, of individual students so that they can form a kind of democratic, cooperative, school community with each other and with their teachers. And that's then also the link, so important to him, between the school and society.

Mandell: When he uses phrases like "democratic social arrangements," it's

exactly that point. I think he is arguing that democratic social arrangements promise more worthwhile experiences.

Winner: He's always reminding us that we need to be thinking about "interactions" in "situations," about transactions between individuals and the environment. So, for him, as he puts it, "interaction is going on between an individual and objects and other persons. The concepts of *situation* and of *interaction* are inseparable from each other" (43).

Shaw: I think that this is exactly how he gets beyond the dichotomy between progressive and traditional education. For Dewey, progressive is more concerned with a student's internal state, and the traditional more concerned with the external state of society and the need to fit students into certain realms by preparing them for social roles. But he wanted to get beyond that. Let's look at the *interaction* between the student's internal state and the context at a given point in time. For him, it's not an either/or. He wants to get beyond the dichotomy by focusing on the process. He wants us to look at how things actually work.

Coulter: You start with a child's experience – with the classes' experience, and you create experiences that are meaningful to them within their own context. And then the lessons you draw are tied to the curriculum that we think they ought to learn. That's where you bring in the "traditional" education: you don't let them do whatever they want to (which, for example, probably does not include learning how to divide!), but you figure out experiences in which division becomes something important for them to know.

Mandell: I think that Dewey is defensive here. He's trying to make an argument for progressive education as *not* meaning out of control, i.e. you can do anything and everything you want – Wayne's earlier description of the "anarchic mess." He wants to find some middle ground. He's being stereotyped as arguing that anything is OK. He just doesn't believe that. In this sense, he's trying to work out a position that is different from the stereotype of the progressive and probably, too, the stereotype of the traditional.

Willis: I think that given what Dewey is saying he would see that much of our work at Empire State College is *not* consistent with his ideas. Our dealing with our students is too isolated for him; we work with our students in too individualized a way. Yes, we do try to work with students from their experiences and help them form their plans of study and put together something that is meaningful to them. That aspect we do pretty well in a pretty Deweyan fashion. But this whole idea of having students think about themselves as part of a community, as part of a society, of working to form collective-cooperative activities with each other – the college is just not set up in a way that succeeds or even tries to do that much in that way. And Dewey would say that this is a limitation that we have had, and that maybe a more traditional classroom-based education actually affords more opportunity for it.

And what we have are adults who already know how to read; they are already in a society, they already have a community, they already have all of those things that a child ... just doesn't yet have.

Winner: Dewey also is drawing lines between levels of engagement of the teacher. You can think of this in terms of the range of ways in which faculty at Empire State College engage with their students in their work, from 'come in and tell me what you want to learn and also tell me how you want to learn it,' to 'this is the syllabus for this individualized study; it's a well-worked out plan.' There are significant differences here.

Here's also a personal example. Both Xenia and I went to the laboratory school of the University of Michigan – I did in middle

school. And they were experimenting with progressive education when I was there. And one such experiment I remember is a math class, which for an entire year was a room filled with games that had various things to do with math. And no teacher involvement at all. The teachers just sat in the background and charted what we were doing and there were shelves of puzzles and games and we could do whatever we wanted. And, I think I remember this: none of us learned anything.

Coulter: I continue to wonder about the difference between the child or the young middle school student you are mentioning, Lucy, and the adult student and the teacher's involvement in that education. Dewey writes, "For example, a child who learns to speak has a new facility and a new desire. But he also has widened the external conditions of subsequent learning But if a person decides to become a teacher, lawyer, physician or stockbroker, when he executes his intention he thereby necessarily determines to some extent the environment in which he will act in the future" (37). And what we have are adults who already know how to read; they are already in a society, they already have a community, they already have all of those things that a child, Lucy, in your middle school math class, just doesn't yet have. So do we really need a classroom situation for those adults? It seems to me that we need exactly the contrary: we need individualized instruction to open up an entirely new 'life of the mind,' so to speak, that they don't already have in their lives.

Mandell: But look what Dewey says next: "He has rendered himself more sensitive and responsive to certain conditions, and relatively immune to those things about him that would have been stimuli if he had made another choice" (37).

Coulter: So you want a child to be as responsive to as many different stimuli as possible, but as an adult, maybe not at all.

Shaw: We shouldn't forget something that Wayne said earlier about Dewey's ideal learning situation, which involves the importance of community. When I have thought about that, I've of course thought about Lucy's fantastic project in Lesotho [South Africa]. It seems to embody exactly the kinds of things that Dewey might favor.

Winner: Yes, it's one of the reasons that Dewey is so interesting to me. In keeping with his spirit, one of the things we're trying in the Winter-Summer Institute [WSI] in Lesotho is a constantly folding over of experience and theory as they exist within a very specific community.

Shaw: There's also the concept of progress, and of educational experiences that have continuity into the future and that have value to the participants in addressing AIDS; the interactions with the community that relates to the situation you find there; and, of course, the strong purpose of the work for everyone involved. All of these qualities of the WSI project reminded me of what we have been discussing.

Mandell: Yes, Julie, I agree; it is directly connected to Dewey's argument about what he calls "the progressive organization of subject matter." Look at what he writes: "Anything which can be called a study, whether arithmetic, history, geography or one of the natural sciences, must be derived from materials which at the outset fall within the scope of ordinary life-experience. In this respect the newer education contrasts sharply with procedures which start with facts and truths that are outside the range of experience of those taught, and which, therefore, have the problem of discovering ways and means of bringing them within experience" (73). Adults are coming in with this astonishing array of "ordinary life experiences," much more than children could ever bring to their studies.

Willis: My reaction to reading Dewey this time is that it's actually much easier to do a Deweyan progressive type of education with adults than it probably is with children. My son went to what was probably considered such an elementary school and the results were very good. He learned a lot. But in visiting the school frequently, I was often struck by how difficult it was to try to construct learning projects, to construct meaningful interesting activities, when you are trying to take into account the experience and the state of impulsivity of a bunch of five or seven year-olds! That's very difficult. When you're working with adults, they're much more formed people; they have a wide range of experiences that have settled into them. And, at the same time, there are things in the world that are

still experientially significant to them. For example, this is an election year. Most of our students are going to vote. That's not why they're in school. They didn't come to college to figure out how they're going to vote in 2008; nevertheless, it's part of their experience that can enter into their education.

Coulter: I wonder. I think about my grandchildren who just had to vote for "the best child in their classroom." That's an experience that a teacher can put into the classroom out of which interesting lessons can be drawn. So, for example, you can ask the children: "is there another way that you can pick this child?" And right there you can have a long discussion about what democracy means and who chooses and why. Or you can use that activity to ask: "how else have these decisions been made in history?" Suddenly you're into history. Or you could graph the responses and make a table. And immediately you have a math lesson. I'm just not so sure adults are prepared for these discussions and this work.

Mandell: I immediately think about the so-called "transformative" theorists of adult education, people like Brookfield and Mezirow. What they are coping with is that one of the difficulties for adults is that experience is not so fluid. In fact, people are stuck: they have very well formed ideas and feelings about things. So the issue of what will unstick a person becomes a bigger question for adults. Many of our adult students come in with experiences that have been stultifying, that have frozen them into a particular world view that's not especially educative. Finding situations that will help them question their experiences becomes harder.

Winner: And I think that's one of the problems with Dewey beginning with children and with experiences that are proximate, that are so immediate. It's important to be able to have an experience – and here is a connection with our project in Africa – that is very much outside of one's environment and then to have to work to make the connection back to one's self rather than always starting with self and working outward. In some of the more rigid Dewey-inspired experiments, there was the idea that children had to start with their

own town, their own neighborhood; it's also really important for children to start with imagination, for example, to start with history that is totally unimaginable to them and then move back to how that connects to their own experience.

Willis: What we're all getting at is that in many ways Dewey is talking about the learner being transformed through the learning experience. Children are going obviously through all sorts of development, whether or not it's happening in some formal learning context or otherwise. And it's true, by the time we see our adult students, yes, they are more formed people. But I'm a little bit troubled by the notion that they are "stuck" and that they need us to get them "unstuck." That's a judgment we are making about them. Yet, from their perspective, they may be relatively happy with who they are and relatively content with their formations of their world view. Too often I think there is some sense that the "transformation" that is supposed to occur is the one that is considered desirable by the "transformative educator."

I think there are huge advantages in working with adult students because they can articulate, or they can be aware when they are not articulating, or they can question.

Shaw: I want to play devil's advocate here and suggest that the nature of the interaction with adult students has more potential in some way. With adult students, we have a bit more understanding of their inner workings, of what Dewey is referring to as the "internal states," than you do with children. Children may be more open to experiences, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're more open to being restructured. I think there are huge advantages in working with adult students because they can articulate, or they can

be aware when they are not articulating, or they can question. And with kids, it's a bit of a guess. With adults, I think there is more out in the open and thus there is more potential to change concepts that a person has and thus possibly change habits.

Coulter: I do want to say again that it's probably more complicated. It's easier for us to deal with people who are like us and think like us. It isn't so easy to deal with people who are quite different. And the whole concept of critical thinking – certainly part of this so-called “transformational” learning – is to rethink things that you have always taken for granted. And that's a huge issue with adult students. They have an already well-put together view of the world. And people are arguing that we *have* to unsettle that view because our lives are changing right under our feet, that we have a whole different world here and we can't just retreat and rely on what we always relied on. We *have* to question our own assumptions. And many people are *not* prepared to deal with changes in that way. It's exactly Dewey's point about the basis of a so-called traditional education that “assumed the future would be much like the past” (19). It just isn't.

Willis: But that kind of thing can occur in an incremental way without being a plan on the part of the educator to transform the student. In American history, the area in which I work with students all the time, a student's view of what American society is now or has been often becomes very unsettled as a result of simply doing a very standard study of American history. And this doesn't happen because I'm out to change their perspective. There's growth that can occur that's embedded in the inquiry itself.

Mandell: The transformational question is really important, but I also don't want to lose this tension between the individual and the community that we also have continued to discuss. I think that Dewey doesn't want us to forget the cognitive strengths and limitations, the values, the ideas and the experiences of the individual student. In order to figure out what kind of American history study might be meaningful for that particular student – as Dewey put it, it is our “responsibility” as educators to understand “the needs and capacities of the individuals

who are learning at a given time” (45). It's all about “particular individuals.” In our Empire State College context, it's about learning contracts and individualized degree programs.

Shaw: And it's also about the sensitivity of the students themselves to where they are and to what they understand about themselves. As I said earlier, adults are just better able to articulate these dimensions. The teaching and learning process can just be much more dialogical, a real back and forth, with adult students.

Willis: It seems to me that to take what Dewey is saying there seriously and to try to apply it to our context would mean that for each individual student there would have to be an awful lot of developmental work going into the planning of each component of each study and, of course, each degree program. As we know from our experience, that's extremely difficult and time consuming for the mentor and for the student. And, of course as well, sometimes that kind of maximum sensitivity is not what the busy adult student expects or is even looking for.

Coulter: And I think that's also an important point for distinguishing between a child and an adult, especially for our students who have other responsibilities. A child does not have many other agendas; so if the teacher of the child explores with them and finds experiences from which that student can learn new things, the child is much more amenable to going along with than an adult who says: ‘well that's all fine and good but I just want to get the study done.’ But having said that, I want to couple it with my own experience, again with my grandchildren, twins, I am supervising. One of them is very open to new experiences. The other one is impatient. So even with little children, there are differences. There are some kinds of kids who, it seems, are willing to go along with some open-ended exploration and others who just are not.

Mandell: There are *many* times in this book where Dewey tells us just how difficult all of this is – a “more serious” and a “harder business” are his phrases. In effect, he wants his readers to know: ‘Don't ever let anyone tell you that this is easy work.’ He's talking about a kind of receptivity to personalities

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(the Coulter point) and to environments (the Winner point) that is amazingly difficult.

Coulter: I wrote on top of one of the pages of the book: “These expectations are, in practice, impossible!”

Willis: They're probably “impossible” for most students most of the time. But when it happens, it's not the typical student. It might only occur when students are in a kind of searching state of mind so that they are receptive to trying to work with someone to develop a plan for themselves in a way that Dewey is suggesting.

Coulter: This does go back to what Julie was saying about what the adult brings to such a situation. With an adult, we have much more of a chance to find out from them what they're thinking and what they're interested in doing – much more than with a child.

Shaw: And the particular student who might be “open” to such an exploration now may not have been as open to it five years ago, or even three years ago; but whatever may have happened five years ago that may not have *appeared* as open may have led to what is happening now. And this particular event may lead to something in the future where that student may be less amenable to redirection, but may have found a direction that guides the rest of his or her life.

Mandell: If it's the case that some of our experiences are not educative – for example, we think of ourselves as “receptors” and not as “active learners,” then might it not be the case that people need different opportunities to re-experience what school can be in such a way that it is more in keeping with what Dewey is describing? Yes, it might be that we are closed off to new ideas or experiences because of our personalities or our socialization, but most adults come to us with a notion of school that has little or nothing to do with Dewey's sense of the learner's participation in his/her own

education. How can we expect anyone to do this, quite literally out of the blue?

Winner: But this is another thing that isn't so either/or. And it can have its own progression. There can be a moment in work with a student that is more externally structured that becomes a more receptive/responsive moment and really *does* integrate the student's own experiences and desires into the work. And this isn't planned. It's so important to recognize these moments because without acknowledging that they do happen, the work becomes as "impossible" as Xenia suggested. We have to think about the significance of those smaller moments.

Mandell: Dewey does have this sense of a "continuous spiral" – for him, it's never a one-time event. These experiences build on each other and that if someone does have a little moment of having a voice in dealing with topic A, there's a spiraling effect that could influence how the student thinks about and participates in topic B. It's an accumulation, maybe, importantly, for both the student and the teacher.

Shaw: I think there's something that Dewey didn't bring up that I think is crucial here – and these are ideas that have emerged with people like Piaget since his time – and it's the power of being in a state of disequilibrium, where there's some kind of dissonance. That dissonance between what had existed in a student's previous framing and what they're learning can be very powerful and can lead to new learning. And the student also can come to recognize that it is in such a state of disequilibrium, however uncomfortable it might be, that she learns so much, so that she can actually seek out experiences that challenge her existing beliefs.

Mandell: Actually, part of the basis of the transformative theory that we were discussing earlier is that it's more likely for adults than younger students to be in situations in which their taken-for-granted assumptions are highlighted and thrown into disarray by life problems of all kinds. Adults are literally pushed into these situations of disequilibrium where openings are provided for reflection and rethinking, and thus for new learning.

Coulter: And thus, the argument goes, this is less likely to occur with children. But maybe Dewey doesn't mention disequilibrium and

dissonance because it may not be so relevant in a situation that he himself defines as including an educator who is much more mature and much better able to see and understand what is going on than any student. Even at Empire State College, many faculty believe that because they are faculty, they are more mature than their students. Perhaps we retain that attitude with adult students inappropriately.

Shaw: But it's also the case that when students feel a dissonance themselves, it can propel them, and if they can somehow share those feelings with us in any way, it's part of the interaction that can lead the mentor to provide things that are especially fruitful to the student.

Willis: When Empire State College was founded, there seemed to be an assumption that a lot of students who were going to find the college were those who were in the state of disequilibrium that we've been discussing, and that they would be searching for this very open kind of educational experience exactly because their state of disequilibrium wasn't helped by being in very traditional educational environments. Yes, that's true for conventionally-aged college students who chose to attend experimental institutions; and it's true for a smaller number of older college students, too. But over the years, those who have come to Empire State College and probably to most adult programs have been a more ordinary population of adults for whom these Dewey-inspired questions about participation and transformation have not been relevant. At least they did not come here because of them. We're wrong if we believe that they do.

Mandell: I see that in some way, Wayne, but I still believe that so much of what Dewey is writing in this book is relevant for what we're doing with our students – even those who are the most pragmatically oriented. I think there's a kind of hope in the way that Dewey writes, and the hope is that if there is this new experience of what he calls "cooperation," people *do* respond in a way that might be different from he would call their "purpose" – that is the purpose that brought them to us in the first place. That's why his chapter in *Experience and Education* on "The Meaning of Purpose" is so interesting to me.

Coulter: You're presuming that you as the educator feel as though you know the student's "purpose" better than they do. The student comes with a stated purpose and you are saying that's really *not* your purpose! There is a hidden assumption here – and Wayne was talking about this earlier – that you want to take the student some place else. That's contradictory. On the one hand, you say that you want to take seriously what a person says they want – to listen and be attentive to the individual; and, at the same time, you don't believe them.

Shaw: When I am talking with my new students on the phone, and because I work with students at a distance I never even physically see them, I can ask something like: "And why is it at this time that you want to learn or do this or that?" And sometimes, over time, things come out that the student had not identified at the beginning. It's not a question of not believing them.

Mandell: We don't have to agree with him, but Dewey does have a set of assumptions about what "freedom" is. And he thinks that there are some "purposes" that are more intrinsically worthwhile, maybe something like 'more reflective of our potential as free human beings,' than other ones.

Willis: Dewey gets around this by never, exactly, specifying what these intrinsically worthwhile purposes are. So, throughout the book, he tries to avoid being prescriptive about what the 'correct' life objectives should be either for an individual or collectively for a society. Yet, anyone who looks at Dewey's life and his many other writings can clearly see that he has an interest in the society moving in a very particular direction, something close to a democratic socialist model. He clearly has a politics. So the tension is right there in Dewey himself: on the one hand, there is a reluctance to say that, as educators, we should be trying to propagandize or socialize our students; on the other hand, in his life, he certainly values some things much more than others. And, of course, at the time of this writing, Dewey was very concerned about trying to protect the educational from being defeated by the power politics of the day.

Mandell: All of us have said this in one way or another during this time together: there is a tension in all of this – including in the ideas of the transformation theorists who we have come back to any number of times in this discussion, about claiming to focus on engaging our students in what Dewey describes as “a process of formation,” and calling for, or at least hoping for, specific ends, particular goals of that same process.

Winner: Do any of us not have a set of assumptions about where we hope as teachers and mentors we desire our students’ learning should ultimately go? It can’t just be about some abstract experiential process

whose end we don’t care about. Dewey just didn’t believe that. I don’t think we do either.

Coulter: All of us have assumptions. That’s why conversations like this one need to happen and should help us, in one way or another, become more aware of our practices and what our specific assumptions really are. But, as we learned years ago when we videotaped our mentoring sessions with students and discussed them with one another, first, we are very often *unaware* of what Dewey refers to as our own pedagogical “habits” and say things that we surely don’t practice; and second, even

if we claim we want to, it’s not so easy for us to change our ways. In this sense, our accumulated experiences as mentors can actually weigh us down.

Shaw: When we talk about teaching, we, of course, are talking about our own beliefs and standards – what Dewey calls “criteria of experience” for teaching. A belief of this college is that one of the most central “criteria” for student learning experiences is so-called life-long learning. And isn’t it interesting that Dewey emphasizes that too: “The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning” (48).

It was stated at the outset, that this system would not be here, and at once perfected. You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my word. But now I leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished, as even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught – nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash and Patience!

– Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick* (1851/1981, p. 148) quoted in Greene, Maxine. *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988, p. 128)

Notes from a Reformed Literary Drill Sergeant

Steve Lewis, Hudson Valley Center

Overheard recently at The Bakery in New Paltz: “That (expletive deleted) professor doesn’t understand that I’m taking three English classes, two other courses and I’m working part time. I mean, how can I possibly do all the reading, get some sleep and still have a life?”

Maybe it was the Costa Rican dark roast, but upon hearing that plaintive wail, I was sucked up into some kind of H.G. Wells’ vortex, calendar pages flipping backward like in 1940s movies, and moments later dumped in creaky, cranky overheated Bascomb Hall at the University of Wisconsin, 1966 ... eyelids drooping, head listing, my unshaven chin slowly falling to my chest moments before whiplashing upright to the sound of my name, “Mr. Lewis ... ,” only to find that the professor was referring to Sinclair, not Steven.

That term I had enrolled in “The American Novel,” (nine novels plus ...) “Shakespeare’s Histories” (10 plays plus ...) and an unforgettably forgettable Scandinavian Literature course (six novels, six plays, lots of characters named Lars), plus two non-English courses I frankly didn’t care about. Indeed, I remember now that one of my first insights into understanding the concept of literary subtext was the realization that it wasn’t humanly possible to read everything assigned to me each semester.

And so I also remembered how I “managed” the subtext that term – and the ones to follow: skimming, Cliffling, cramming, scamming, copying and – the English major’s best friend – BS-ing my way through too many of those insulting (to the authors) passage identification questions, those insulting (to the students) multiple guess questions, those wearying compare and contrast essays, those bogus end-of-semester 15 page research papers that were returned, if they were ever returned, with

a letter grade and a two-word comment scribbled in red.

Which was when I willfully stopped time traveling (and eaves-slurping on the caffeine-driven conversation at the next table) and for the first time in a long career in education did some basic academic accounting: during those halcyon undergraduate days my English classes would normally assign 8 - 10 major works



Steve Lewis

of literature. At a reading rate of 25 - 30 pages an hour (the pace for careful reading enjoyment, not scholarship), it would take me 12 - 15 hours to read the typical 400 page literary novel – just once – and that wouldn’t include the associated critical material – or the work on the five page paper due in a few weeks – or the midterm – or that big term paper due at the end of the semester – or the final – or even the three hours of lecture each week. That adds up to a conservative 20 - 30 hours per week per course. And that’s before I would begin work on four other courses taught by professors, each of whom clearly operated on the principle that theirs was the only class I was taking. And did I mention that I

had a part-time job washing dishes at Mama Brava’s on State Street – and had a girlfriend with the exotic name of Sasha?

So what did I do with all that “learning”? Well, the shame of it is that I learned my lessons well, went on to grad school and emerged a shaggy-behind the ears English instructor. And in my formative teaching years before I came to Empire State College (via lots of Freshman Comp and American Lit survey classes, creative writing workshops, a gig as an AP English instructor), I, like any well-hazed fraternity hazer or a beaten survivor of boot camp, continued the cycle of abuse by assigning more reading and writing for my poor students than any adolescent could hope to accomplish in two or three years in a monastery. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*

It’s tempting to look back at my time as a literary drill sergeant and call it academic machismo, but as it seemed to have known no gender bounds, machismo works just as well. And as the exasperated coed at the next table reminded me, very little has changed in our English departments over the past 30 or 40 years.

Nor, it seems, is it substantively different in other disciplines. In fact, I observed similar kinds of workload mistreatment when my son Danny was a history major in Madison and once had to write five research papers due after Thanksgiving; when my daughter Addie, who barely survived an Exercise Science major at Penn State (which of course left no time for exercise), found herself taking 24 credits per semester in her first year in chiropractic school; when my son-in-law Jeffrey barely survived the standard issue sleep deprivation foisted on first-year law students. To quote my pal from Ecclesiastes, “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.”

Which brings me back to the bloodshot-eyed coed at the next table. Or, better still, the bleary-eyed adult students we see daily at Empire State College trying to juggle jobs, children, relationships, a miserable war, a sinking economy, global warming – and everything else that goes along with being an adult learner in this already tired old new millennium. I can't begin to tell you – well, yes I can – how grateful I was that I stumbled into a college where real learning is valued over the appearance of learning. And yes, my gratitude has grown contract by contract, CBE by CBE, unique student by utterly unique student along the ever-challenging way.

Over nearly two decades as a mentor at this “college without walls” my students have taught me – one by one by one – that the more realistic and thus moderated the

assigned workload, the more engaged and more receptive they will be in the learning process; and the more interesting, thoughtful and original the work I will receive from them in return; and, in turn, the more elevating and engaging will be my job.

Yet, at the risk of being labeled an academic cream puff (I've been called much worse), I worry that as this college moves inexorably toward the look and feel of a traditional walled institution with our grades, our terms, our newly emergent confusions between teaching and mentoring, and our mind bogglingly insistent quest for consistency (about which the aforementioned Sinclair had a few good words to say), we will leave ourselves vulnerable to being imprisoned in a similarly abusive culture.

Before that happens, perhaps we need to sit down with our center colleagues, roll up our sleeves, put on the visors and do the real world accounting. How many hours per week should we reasonably expect a student to spend on one of our studies? How long should it take in real world hours to read any text or passage and understand the material? What is the actual function of an assigned essay and how many words/pages should it really take to demonstrate that learning has taken place? How many hours, days, weeks should any student schedule in a busy life to work on a research project in order to emerge with something of true value, not just the same old shuck and jive that the student at The Bakery was going to submit to her (expletive deleted) English professor?

“learners and ... adult educators ... might want to practice some ... moderation or balance when it comes to our oft-repeated slogans like LIFELONG LEARNING or LEARNING NEVER ENDS ... [T]here are often, in addition to the Teachable Moments, Non-Teachable Moments, Non-Learning Moments. A life spent in the never-ending pursuit of learning would be very narrow and probably impossible. When would there be time for feeling and doing? If LEARNING NEVER ENDS, then living never begins! We really don't need to continually lay such Puritan guilt trips on others and on ourselves.

– John Ohliger. If “Learning Never Ends,” Does Living Ever Begin?
(from a talk given at the Second Annual Conference of the Illinois
Adult and Continuing Educators' Association, March 1981)

The Liturgy of Pedagogy

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“The liturgy, like the feast, exists not to educate but to seduce people into participating in common activity of the highest order, where one is freed to learn things which cannot be taught.”¹

Near the close of the spring term of 2006, during that liminal period when classes have just ended, grades are dutifully being logged, and graduation is still a week or two away, my department chair gave me the green light to develop a new course for the spring 2007 term. Our department of religious studies at Eugene Lang College is very small and we’d been waiting for this opportunity for some time, but as the years (yes, years) passed, the prospect seemed more theoretical than probable, hence I had done very little concrete research beyond identifying an area of study that was of interest to me and to my students.² A suddenly available budget line, along with the demand for another upper-level religious studies seminar, turned a remote possibility into a reality almost overnight.

To placate the gods of the New School University computer system, I submitted a title for the new course: “Death and Mourning in the Religious Imagination.” I wanted the broad scope that this wording would afford me as I pursued my research. Nevertheless, this was tantamount to signing on the dotted line and the reality of what I had agreed to was now upon me.

The spring term ended. My department chair waved good-bye and went abroad on a year’s sabbatical. The temperature rose, my many pairs of sandals beckoned, but I became obsessed with death and its rituals, and instead of heading to an idyllic vacation spot, I went to the library, to the Internet and to amazon.com. The course would begin at the end of January, and I had six months to create a syllabus, ex nihilo, of 50 hours of class time on a subject that

interested me greatly, but about which, in truth, I knew very little.³

First, I began an online search to determine what sorts of courses were being taught on death and mourning at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. What I found was vast and overwhelming. There were graduate seminars in thanatology, palliative care and the hospice movement. Pastoral theology practica on responding to



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grief and loss. Psychology classes focusing on melancholia and depression. Courses on ethics and death that dealt with assisted suicide, euthanasia and the right to die movement. An examination of disease and the disposition of corpses in the social history of medicine. Literature electives that traced the history and development of the elegy. Anthropology surveys of death in cross-cultural perspective. Sociology and cultural studies seminars on the changing trends in the funeral industry. Architectural assessments of the design of cemeteries and mausoleums. Historical theology training its interpretive lens on medieval eschatology and concepts of heaven and hell. Biblical studies courses on the resurrection of the dead and immortality, and religious studies

classes that considered Jewish and Christian perspectives on the afterlife.

What this research accomplished was significant. First, it provided an extensive bibliography in a relatively short period of time. To be honest, it was rather like being back in graduate school. If a text or article came up more than once, I got hold of it without delay. Secondly, it made plain the kinds of courses that I did not want to teach by virtue of my interest or academic background or their suitability for an upper-level undergraduate seminar. Next: the array of syllabi I saw online was simultaneously reassuring and terrifying. The sort of course I yearned to teach on death and mourning (inchoate though it was at this stage) did not seem to exist in any department, and this reoccurring sense of something being missing, of the possibility of yet another way to consider this subject, compelled me to articulate and sharpen my own focus and to risk creating my own approach.

“Oh, it must be so depressing to read all that stuff about death!” opined various friends and colleagues when they learned what I was working on. But they were wrong.

The six preparatory months that I spent reading about death and mourning neither depressed nor horrified me. And though certain themes and images seeped into my imagination by day and my dreams at night, they were not the stuff of nightmares or horror flicks. What I read filled me with immense awe, beholding what Kenneth Burke called “the symbol making, symbol using” capacity of humankind as we seek to respond to the profound mysteries of being. And when I turned to the fundamental epistemological and pedagogical question as I prepared to create a syllabus: *What did I want my students to know and how did I want them to know it?* – awe in the face of the mystery and inevitability of death and awe as a response to the symbolic

vocabulary created to attend to it – was what I hoped to transmit.

Creating a Context for Awe

“The people who weep before my pictures,” said the painter Mark Rothko, “are having the same religious experience I had when painting them.”⁴

Along with his paintings, Rothko’s words, which I first read more than 20 years ago, captivate me because, among many other things, they testify to the nonverbal transmission of states of being, unbounded by linear time or particularity of circumstance. Certainly I had experienced what Rothko described. When I beheld his paintings, especially his late work, created in the darkening years leading up to his suicide in 1970, my entire body felt bathed in red ochre, submerged as if descending into a Neolithic tomb.

One cannot teach awe of this kind, of course. But one can endeavor to create a context, even in an entirely secular, academic arena, within which those gathered are “freed,” as Aidan Kavanagh has noted, “to learn things which cannot be taught.” Facilitating the sort of pedagogical experience that transforms the classroom into a sacred, permeable place, conducive to an encounter with awe, is akin to the process by which liturgy and other kinds of rituals are created and enacted and involves:

- a willingness to incorporate the aesthetic dimension, and to engage as many of the senses as possible;
- a deliberate focus on the body – ours and those whom we study – and the physical dimensions of learning;
- the creation of community as well as the praxis of hierarchy; *mutatis mutandis*, Kavanagh has written, of the one who leads liturgy, “He [sic] presides not over the assembly, but within it; he does not lead it but serves it”⁵
- the utilization of a range of authoritative sources and traditions that speak to the ultimate questions and yearnings of a people over time/history;
- the selection of text(s) and textual elements, variously construed, that engage and challenge the participants

with their multiple levels of meaning and rich symbolic content;

- the careful attention to the ordering of these elements as well as to the over-arching concerns to which this endeavor ultimately yearns;
- a receptivity to experience that resides at the interpenetration of “worlds” or multiple dimensions and an awareness of the fissures that sometimes occur in linear time;
- unimpeded access to the places in one’s inner being that have been imprinted with (and by) the experience of awe;
- and the ability, coupled with the willingness, of the one who “professes” to simultaneously be completely full and utterly empty, to surrender and be suffused; and to decant, as it were, her own being-in-response-to-mystery into the learning space.

Presiding from this place means that one no longer talks *about* something, but rather embodies the kind of relational speech-act that enables something (or, more properly, Something) to be summoned, manifested, called forth, transforming the one presiding and those with whom she shares a sense of “address.” In other words, it is “experiential immersion,” and for me, it is the way in which the students and I share substance of what it means to *know* together.⁶ This is indeed tremendously intimate, undeniably risky and profoundly distance reducing – in every conceivable direction, but interestingly, there is no sense of a free-for-all, no quasi-group therapy “sharing of feelings.” The sacredness of the endeavor is palpable, both in the quality of silence that sometimes emerges, and in the “perfect pitch” of the students’ comments and contributions. And, like the vast freedom that is often possible within a highly structured and regulated form (I am thinking of counterpoint and the fugue, for example), the meticulously crafted syllabus I rely on keeps us safe as we soar.

As fall gave way to winter, I had accumulated a wealth of resources on death and mourning, among them Loring Danforth on the ritual exhumation of bones in rural, contemporary Greece; Caroline Walker Bynum on the issues of material continuity that preoccupied theologians

in the medieval world; Jonathan Parry on the economy of death in Banaras; Gary Laderman on the cultural significance of all those 1950s cinema zombies and revenants; and Philip Soergel on the afterlives of monstrous infants in Reformation Germany.

When mid-December arrived, I declared a moratorium on further reading. Over the following two-week period, I had everything Xeroxed that might possibly make its way into the syllabus course binder, and I reshelved everything that was not relevant or compelling. Because I had no commitments or obligations on Christmas day and distractions would be at a minimum, I had reserved it on the calendar for the creation of the syllabus.

Fifty books and 93 articles sat on my dining table in piles and categories, awaiting a winnowing process. A friend and colleague who teaches religious studies at Fordham

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University (and, who, like me, is a product of both Empire State College and the Harvard Divinity School), generously offered to be present as I sorted through it all. He came prepared with mechanical pencils, a ruler, lots of moral support, and a very elegant and unusual pad of horizontally-oriented graph paper which I’d never before seen the likes of and, which I must confess, delighted and inspired me with its promise of order and a new perspective on the task at hand.

As we walked around my dining table and I introduced him to what I had collected, it was clear that no matter which books and articles I ultimately selected, students would be required to demonstrate formidable skills of interpretation, analysis and a close

reading of texts. Yet I knew that reading alone would not suffice.

We could not just read *about* death, I told my friend, as he stood by, graph paper at the ready.

We would have to welcome death into the classroom.

Listening to – and Learning from – the Dead

For 15 weeks, the dead were with us.⁷

And it was the syllabus, structurally and syntactically informed by principles drawn from the theory and practice of liturgics, which simultaneously invited and contained our encounter with death.

Liturgy, through its form, syntax and content, accomplishes several important tasks. Its individual elements as well as its overarching trajectory continually remind participants of the ultimate purpose for which they have gathered. Liturgy attracts and attenuates the charged encounter with the uncontainable *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* and provides a set of necessary protective “guardrails.” The linear, presentational structure of liturgy, combined with a carefully considered sequencing of its discrete yet interconnected elements, allow participants to move gradually and safely back and forth between the “part” and the “whole;” the micro and macro dimensions of numinous experience.

Distinguishing between the function of signs and symbols, liturgical theologian Aidan Kavanagh has written that “... symbols, being roomy, allow many different people to put them on, so to speak, in different ways Symbols coax one into a swamp of meaning and require one to frolic in it. Symbol is rarely found among the inactive, the obtuse, the confused or the dull.”⁸ Though the dead may be dead, they are hardly dull. And the readings assigned in the first “liturgical unit” of the syllabus, “*Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Encountering Death,*” summoned into our midst the dead and those who cared for them, and, in turn, lured us into the symbolic sea in which the dead swim. Half a dozen very diverse personal accounts – ranging from Jewish Buddhist Natalie Goldberg contemplating emptiness, loss and impermanence as she sits outside a crematorium, watching the

body of her adored Roshi reduced to ash; to undertaker Thomas Lynch, who, along with his brother, follow in the family business and solemnly, tenderly, embalm their father’s body in preparation for Roman Catholic burial rites – enabled us to begin to create a vocabulary of the ritual symbolism surrounding death.

And then there were our dead, the ones we had lost: relatives, young friends, beloved pets. The first writing assignment, due for the third class, brought them back to us once more:

Write an essay (four pages) detailing your most significant encounter with death and the issues and questions it raised for you. Be sure to include an awareness of your own body in that encounter, along with a recollection of sensations, thoughts, impulses, sights, smell, the context and surroundings, etc.

Each essay was read aloud and we heard how these dead, the old and the young, met their end: tragic accidents; sudden illness; incremental, inevitable decline. Our dead, and the authors’ dead, began to teach us.

Death was never abstract to us, and the deliberate focus on the polysemous nature of body and its particularity – never just *any* body – was central throughout the term:

This seminar explores selected religious rituals and practices associated with death and mourning, with particular attention to the human body as a locus of sacrality and dread, redemption and contamination, and the repository of individual and collective memory The visibility – or invisibility (read: marginalization) – of certain dead bodies and the way in which they meet their death (blacks in America, the Disappeared in Latin America, victims of 9/11, et al.) also will be of concern to us; thus, issues of race, class and gender will be woven throughout our discussions.

Though death is sometimes called “the great equalizer,” all bodies, we soon realized, were not equal in the way that they met – or were treated in – death. Some, we learned, were returned to the earth in bronze caskets; others, in a plain pine box

or in nothing save a white linen shroud. We encountered bodies that were intact at the time of death and those who were disfigured or violated by disease, poverty, violence. We encountered the bodies of the sick and the well, the suddenly dead and those who died before they could even be born. Bodies that were lynched, embalmed, exhumed, cremated or fashioned into effigies. Bodies ready for resurrection or bound for other realms. We also considered the social implications and range of meanings associated with tending to the dead: in other words, who was entitled to do what and to whom, further sensitizing us to issues at the intersection of race, class, economic status, gender and religious practice.

Music marked and framed the boundary of our class time and signaled that we were entering into a different sort of learning experience. When I first began to envision this seminar, I had hoped to incorporate art. I dreamed of images arising and dissolving silently, seamlessly, on the classroom wall while we discussed the assigned readings, but alas, the undergraduate I hired to do the research didn’t come through, so I had to content myself with the music made for death. At the beginning and/or the end of each class, I pushed the “play” button on our little CD player and we listened together: a New Orleans funeral marching band, festal and magisterial; lugubrious Appalachian folk songs; the ecstatic, spirit-driven rhythms of Afro-Cuban drumming; the terrifying “Dies Irae” from Verdi’s Requiem contrasted with the angelic “Pie Jesu” from Fauré; shimmering Vietnamese Buddhist temple music; a keening El Male Rachamim, intoned in Hebrew; Billie Holiday singing “Strange Fruit.”

Liturgy requires, among other things, the attentive participation of those assembled, led by an appointed or agreed-upon presider or president. As professor, this was, of course, my de facto role, but rather than have students be subjected to my teaching style unremittingly for an entire semester, once registration settled down after the two initial shape-shifting weeks of term, I instituted a sign-up process, indicating which classes were available for student presiding. This offered them the opportunity to stand inside the text(s) and master a portion of the material, develop and exercise

leadership skills, foster community with their peers, reduce the hierarchical distance between my place at the seminar table and theirs, and to establish another kind of pedagogical rhythm. They tackled these responsibilities admirably, with significant attention to detail coupled with what I can only characterize as hermeneutical gusto.

The Syntax of the Syllabus

As Kavanagh has noted, “Liturgy is a ritual language, embracing far more than words and texts alone. One who would put a liturgy together cannot stop merely by getting straight the things to be said. Things also to be done must be considered, when they are to be done, and how they are to be done.” Each “liturgical unit” of the syllabus was another gate that we passed through, taking us more deeply into relations with the dead in a range of historical and contemporary socio-religious contexts. The aforementioned introductory unit, “*Will the Circle Be Unbroken?*,” concluded with “Death and Memory: From Santa Maria del Monte to Miami Beach,” a lengthy essay by anthropologist Ruth Behar, from her book, *The Vulnerable Observer*. A Jew from Cuba of both Sephardi and Ashkenazi ancestry, Behar is occupied with fieldwork in a remote village in Spain when she learns of the death of her cherished *zayde*, her grandfather, in Florida. Behar knows the religious rituals and customs of the Spanish Roman Catholic villagers with whom she has lived and studied extensively, but her sense of loss is exacerbated when she realizes her ignorance regarding the mourning practices of her own family, her own people.

Moving back and forth between an urbanized Miami and the rural Santa Maria del Monte, Behar utilizes her own experience in order to introduce a constellation of socio-cultural, economic and religious issues: What are the implications of modernity on caring for the dead? What, in fact, does it mean to “care” for the dying and the dead? For Spanish Roman Catholics? For diasporic Jews? What is the result of the “medicalization” of death? How does the role of the family differ in these settings? How do we learn to grieve, to mourn? What are the obligations of the living toward the dead, and vice versa? In what ways is individual and communal

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memory nurtured and passed on? How do we respond to the attenuation of tradition?

In terms of its content and location in the syllabus, Behar’s essay served multiple functions within the overall context of the liturgy of pedagogy. Read at the end of the second week of term, it encapsulated and foreshadowed a number of significant themes that we would revisit throughout the sweep of the semester. It also provided a transition or bridge to the next section of the syllabus: the first of the three religious traditions that we would study in depth, *Unit II: “The soul is Yours. The body is Yours. Deal with us according to Your Name.”* Death and Mourning in Judaism; followed by *Unit III: “Rama nama satya hai!”* Death and Mourning at the Great Cremation Ground; and *Unit IV: “Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death.”* Death and Mourning in Christianity.

Seeking an Experiential Epistemology

Early on in my preparatory reading – and in reaction to some of the syllabi I’d seen online – I had decided against the “cafeteria”-style, world-religions survey approach. Instead, I selected three religious

traditions that offered a considerable amount of contrast and complementarity in terms of their ritual practices and tropes. Also, and of equal importance, these practices had been imprinted within my body, and I wanted to be able to trace my way back to sensory-infused moments as I taught.

As a minister, I knew what it felt like to anoint the forehead of a dying woman with consecrated oil, to recite a litany that, with each repetition, carried her further away from this world; to gaze into an open burial vault, intoning that seemingly impossible but steadfast proclamation from *The Book of Common Prayer*: “[E]ven at the grave we make our song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.”¹⁰

As a Jew, I knew what it felt like to sit *shimrah* in the middle of the night, to reach into the earth with my bare hands on a bitterly cold, New England December day to cover the grave of my beloved rabbi and teacher; to sit shivah for a week, but never on Shabbat when, even in the face of immense loss, we are commanded to rejoice. I knew what it felt like, six months later, having just returned from the cemetery where I’d buried my father, to kneel at the threshold of my apartment door and pour cool water over my hands. The pitcher and bowl had been left there by an anonymous member of the *chevra kadisha* [the burial society] of my synagogue, expressing the highest *mitzvot* [good deeds] of the tradition.

I knew, too, what it felt like to sit motionless in a small, dilapidated boat in front of Marnikarnika *ghat*, the burning ground on the banks of the Ganga, watching ashes from the funeral pyre cascade into the river, the Supernal Mother. I had wandered through the labyrinthine alleyways above the *ghats* of this ancient Indian city that also is the abode of Shiva, the Lord of Death and Rebirth. I’d seen the hostels for the dying and for their families who tended them during their final hours. I’d seen the funerary wares for sale: sandalwood paste to anoint the dead, cloth of red and gold to wrap them, head to toe. I’d heard the bells ring in countless temples, awakening the gods to their sacred task. And I saw the dead, shrouded and garlanded, borne on bamboo ladders down to the river by men chanting “*Nam Ram Satya Hai!*” – “The

Name of God is Truth” – while the doms chopped the wood and stoked the fire, ready to receive them.

This kind of knowledge, the imprint of experience, loss and memory, needed to come forth from my own body and “decant” into the learning space.

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Utilizing Multiple Authoritative Voices

In this course, we benefited from multiple authoritative sources: ourselves, the dead, mourners. We added to this the scholarly work of historians, philosophers and social scientists and the pastoral, reflective teachings of clergy and theologians.

Beginning with *Unit V: Dead and Buried in 19th and 20th Century America: Making Sure the Dead Stay Dead*, we moved into a wider context and explored a range of issues pertaining to social anxiety and boundary-maintenance between the living and the dead, largely through the lens of historical and cultural analysis. We traced the rhetorical development of early 20th century American religious and public health tropes that addressed the disposition of the dead, with particular attention to the popularization of cremation, the professionalization of the funeral industry, and the establishment of psycho-normative patterns of mourning and bereavement.

Memory and marginalization, the erasure and (re)-creation of identity, and violation of bodily integrity were central themes in *Unit VI: The Invisible Dead*. The death we encountered here was raw, untimely and impossibly cruel; stalking, capturing, its victims in the open: lynching and ghetto carnage; roadside tragedies; terrorism and

torture. Los Desaparecidos. Displaced Chicanas/os. The fallen of 9/11. How do we mourn when there is no body in our midst? Or when it is distorted beyond recognition? Or regarded as utterly marginal to the larger, social body? We read testimonies from the African-American church and community. We contemplated the commemorative uses of photography and “memory pictures;” of memorial walls and urban shrines. Understandably, the unit that followed this one, “*Why Do Your Eyes Not Run Like a River?*,” offered a brief, cross-cultural, comparative discussion of the socio-religious dimensions of crying, tears and other public expressions of grief.

Throughout the term, we analyzed and compared “thick descriptions” and the layers of symbolic meaning embedded in religious practices, and we exegeted and interpreted primary texts of ritual procedures and proscriptions involving mourners and the dead themselves. And we asked many questions: Do the dead go through stages? How long does it take to “get dead,” and in what ways do the living assist the dead in this process? Where are the dead headed? Who is allowed to view the dead, to attend them, to prepare them? Why does water figure so prominently in rituals involving the dead? Is the body of the deceased to remain inviolate and intact? Or does fragmentation of the body at the time of death (such as in the case of relics) confer benefit to the living and/or guarantee unity in another realm?

What is the relationship between the body of the mourner and the body of the deceased? Are mourners permitted to wash? To shave? To cut their hair? To engage in sexual activity? Are these rules different for men and for women? What do mourners wear? What do the dead wear? Do the dead require nourishment? What is the symbolism attached to the food that mourners consume? How are the dead known – by the living and by other dead? Do they still retain their names and other markers of identity and status? What is the role of the clergy or other religious authorities – of blood relations? of the community? – at the time of death and afterward? Is there an “economy” of death? What are the times of the year when the dead are commemorated? How is death itself understood?

Venturing Beyond Written Texts

As compelling as the many books and articles we read were, we did not only interact with and learn from written texts. We took in Gayle Ferraro’s hypnotic documentary, *Ganges: River to Heaven*, that I’d first seen a few years earlier at the Margaret Mead Film Festival, a filmic portrait of death in Banaras so intimate that we could almost smell the incense and marigolds commingling with the smoke of the cremation pyres.

Andre Solomon-Glover sang to us. “Steal Away.” “Go Down, Death.” “Ride on, King Jesus.” His bass-baritone voice saturated our space and shook us to the core with its power. Having very nearly crossed over Jordan himself a few short years ago – a star on Broadway and the international opera stage when he suffered a sudden, massive cerebral hemorrhage – the unaccompanied spirituals he offered us for nearly two hours, interlaced with commentary on their provenance and meaning in the black church in which he’d grown up, were, for him now, a proclamation of what he had seen and known.

Listening, we wept.

When Myriam Abramowicz, the daughter of Holocaust survivors and the founding member of the *chevra kadisha* [the burial society] of Congregation B’nai Jeshurun, removed the contents of a large box imprinted with Hebrew writing that she’d placed on the seminar table – a pristine set of handmade white linen burial shrouds – I could sense the collective pulse shift, the coolness that hovered at the edge of the air.

In the days before her visit, we had poured over the highly detailed instructions for performing the *taharah*, the ritual washing and dressing of the dead, but Myriam demonstrated how she clothed the *met* [the deceased] with utmost modesty, ritually tying the knots of the garments, veiling the face, carefully slipping on the trousers whose feet had been sewn shut. And then she handed the shrouds to us. One student stroked the linen against her cheek. Another pressed them to his face, breathing in their scent.

“Ask Father Duffell,” became our refrain each time we encountered a point of arcane

medieval Catholic theology that we couldn't unravel. But when the day of his class visit arrived, John Duffell, a Roman Catholic priest and a colleague of mine from the West Side Clergy Association, surprised us when he said that those doctrinal conundrums about death, resurrection and the afterlife did not preoccupy or concern him. Opening his worn, black leather-bound funeral mass book, its pages yellowed and crinkled, he explained, from all those graveside committals that he had performed in the rain, he uttered not a word of dogma. Instead, he told us stories woven from the New Testament gospels and the lives of those whom he'd loved and then buried: countless parishioners; his best "dinner and drinks" buddy; and finally his own young, handsome nephew who was in the Trade Center that morning when the planes hit.

And we learned from one another.

Jake, a religious studies concentrator, would often schmooze with me while I was getting settled before class.

"This is very burdensome, Katherine," he remarked one day while I was taking attendance.

He was a first-rate student and not one to complain, but hearing the gravitas in his voice, I knew at once what he meant. The second written assignment was due soon:

In a conventional will, we bequeath our worldly goods. In a living will, we make known our wishes regarding medical issues and intervention. In the Jewish tradition, there is an additional document known as an ethical will, in which an individual discusses the ideals that they have lived by and wish to transmit to their friends and family. For this assignment, write your own ethical will (not less than four pages, not more than six). We will share and discuss them in class.

He – and the other students – knew me well enough to know that this was not an "as if," "let's pretend" assignment. This was an opportunity for them to mine and articulate the wisdom of their own experience. And they did just that:

Cultivate relationships and a spiritual practice. Live "in constant pursuit of the spiritual ideal." Study the religions

of the world and "never simply write them off as useless. Nothing is useless to the purpose of spiritual growth." Be safe if and when you choose to engage in explorations of consciousness.¹¹

Combine patriotism with social activism. Practice nonviolence whenever possible. Read Hesse. Study Taoism. Remind yourself of John F. Kennedy's vision of the future. Understand the privileges of your birthright and "stretch for something all-inclusive, all-encompassing."¹²

Don't forget to wash regularly, keep your room neat, have a kind word for others, even and especially on the days

*And we learned
from one another.*

when you don't feel like it.¹³ Travel. Explore other cultures. And don't shy away from trying new foods!¹⁴

Know the value of asking questions, of learning from children. And never stop learning – period. "You will be young forever if you always pursue knowledge."¹⁵

"My first goal in life ... is to come face to face with myself As well as I can see, relationship cannot exist without self-awareness. Without self-awareness there can be no true compassion, no true love, no true communication, no communion, no common unity. Without self-awareness there can be no trust, no sharing, no relating When engaged in relationship, we share in the weight of each other's experiences, we are in a constant state of returning, turning back to each other's experiences and our own."¹⁶

Avoid alienating your family and feeling alienated from them. Work with the complexities that come with family; "the model of the perfect family is false." Family is "my heritage, my blood, my link to the chain of human history."¹⁷

Don't let urban life harden you. Don't hide yourself away from the world or shut yourself off from other people. Remember the importance of art and beauty. Try to do good in the world. Repair mistakes. Engage in self-reflection. Be forgiving. And regarding death: "Let yourself come face to face with this most fundamental of human fears."¹⁸

Teaching Death and Mourning

"As does any art form, the liturgy gives enlarged room for imagination, for investment in and appropriation of values, and for freedom."¹⁹

As a liturgy advances, it accumulates symbolic actions into a final, culminating moment, and for our seminar that was the last project unit: "The Committal: The Death and Mourning Fair." When I put together the syllabus and projected to the end of the term, I could not imagine reading – or requesting that students write – research papers. Rather, I wanted them to demonstrate their fluency in the symbolic language of death through a creative form that would best convey their ideas to those assembled in the flesh – and in spirit.

Since this is a very reading-intensive course, the final project will offer you an opportunity to approach the subject of death and mourning in the religious imagination through other forms/media. The last two class meetings ... will be devoted to a Death and Mourning Fair. At the fair, you will have the opportunity to present your final projects.

Some possibilities regarding form:

- film/video
- CD
- photo essay
- performance piece
- other art form/media (I will entertain all reasonable proposals.)

... and content:

- liturgy/ritual
- music (your own or a compilation)
- interview/oral history/narrative
- a contemporary ars moriendi "manual," based on your own research

- sacred space or memento mori creation.

In addition to your creative project, everyone is required to hand in a paper (due on the day of presentation) that discusses each of the following points:

- the rationale for your choice of genre;
- the goals/intention of your project – what you set out to achieve;
- how well you met your goals: your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the final product;
- the way(s) in which the material from the course informed/inspired your project and the way in which your project fits into the course (this will require you to analyze, interpret and contextualize your project);
- the sources you consulted in order to do this project.

At the end of the first week of term, I distributed a project proposal form that asked students to identify:

- first and second choices/ideas for their project;
- learning goals;
- how they thus far understood their project to fit into the themes and foci of the course;
- how they planned to go about researching/creating their project;
- and whether they wished to work alone or as part of a team.²⁰

I accepted all proposals on a rolling basis, effective immediately, but no later than the start of spring break (essentially, the semester mid-point). Every few weeks, we had periodic “check-ins” when students offered updates on their projects and solicited resources and feedback from me and from their peers. This process encouraged a shared investment in each other’s ideas and a sense of heightened expectation and excitement as the fair drew near. Following a schedule that we had agreed upon early in the term, students presented and discussed their work during the final two classes.

When the first day of the fair arrived, James was already assembling his materials as we entered the classroom. During our unit on death and mourning in Hinduism, he was intrigued by a passing reference in Jonathan

Parry’s *Death in Banaras* pertaining to the ritual construction of an effigy that is cremated on the funeral pyre in cases when a person is missing and presumed dead. With a little guidance from me, James tracked down and obtained the original text, composed in Sanskrit, from the library at the University of Chicago, then arranged for it to be translated in its entirety.

We gathered round as James set to work.

The creation of the effigy is a highly detailed and delineated process. Each part of the body (which itself is understood to exist in more than one dimension/level) has its symbolic correspondent in the natural world: fruits, vegetables, particular kinds of grasses and so on.

“I dribbled honey over the entire body to form the blood,” he explained to us, indicating when he needed to improvise – not all the required elements could be found in New York! “A coconut for the head, eggplant for testicles, wool for hair. Mud represents muscle fat, whereas sesame paste is for [the] joints, and barley flour is in the place of flesh.”²¹ A representation of an unknown person – a primordial man – took shape before us.

Several students elected to trace the evolution of a death-related image or interpret a symbolic system. Jake looked at the range of meanings associated with the death card in the Tarot, while Roslyn focused on the religious and cultural significance of vampires and revenants in contemporary and historical perspective. Ariella came to her presentation outfitted in Death Metal gear and analyzed song lyrics and accompanying artwork. Deftly avoiding New Age clichés, Sophie took us on a scholarly tour of the underworld, presenting the death rituals and religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians. Danielle, who was interning at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and had a passion for medieval art history, utilized illuminated manuscripts and Books of Hours to explore the influence of the Black Plague on religious and secular depictions of death. Ana put together a PowerPoint presentation of Puritan gravestone art filled with winged skulls and angels and cherubim, heralding another world.

Amelia and Aria were both drawn to the commemorative aesthetic. Amelia, who has a long-standing interest in the role of the body in religious practices and rituals, created a compendium of Victorian-era “memory pictures” culled from her archival research: sepia-toned images of stalwart, grief-stricken parents cradling a stillborn baby, dressed in a christening gown; families surrounding their loved one who appears merely to be asleep.

Aria, an artist who was concurrently studying techniques of welding, created an interactive shrine. On the day of her presentation, she spread paints and paper and pieces of fabric before us on the seminar table, leading us in a process of recollection and re-creation. We told stories of our dead, spoke their names, crafted spontaneous mementos from the materials she brought, and then placed them inside the shrine or fastened them to its structure like little prayer flags. In the paper that accompanied her presentation, Aria wrote:

Shrines not only act as places in which the dead and living may commune; they also seek to shape and reinforce a particular narrative about a community’s history and sense of self Because I tend to learn through doing, touching and seeing, I thought that the making of a shrine would be the best starting point ... to investigate these themes The wire that I used reminds me of a chain-link fence; an extremely mundane, utilitarian object that is nonetheless able to be transformed into a living site of grief, memory-making and communion. I had been worried about ... the transformation of raw material into sacred material. Where the shrine once appeared stark and barren, it is now, ironically, colorful and full of life. I feel that every piece of paper and clothing attached to it is a sacred object which has been entrusted to my care Shrines seem to become necessary when the death feels most “unnatural,” when the rupture caused by it is most severe, most irreconcilable. ... Shrines often act as spaces in which the collective identity of a community is constructed (or reconstructed) in the aftermath of tragedy.²²

Gala's presentation was the last, inspired by an essay that we read by Ariel Dorfman on the political and existential uses of photography to affirm and reclaim identity in the face of state-sponsored violence and terrorism.

Gala turned off the lights and turned on her laptop. An image appeared on the projection screen. Thousands upon thousands of bodies, a massive "lie-in," each one surrounded by a chalk outline on the streets of her native Caracas, and in neighborhoods, at sites, where murders and kidnappings had taken place. Narrating for more than 20 minutes without notes and without pause, Gala flashed one harrowing photograph after another, taken not by the "official" press, but by private citizens of Venezuela who used their bodies to mirror the dead and to protest the upsurge in violent crime.

When she finally turned off her computer and turned on the lights, no one spoke.

In silence, we departed.

The Dismissal

Liturgy, like the syllabus, which frames and engages ultimate questions, paradoxically offers containment and freedom within bounded space and time. And when it ends, it must finally return those gathered back to the world in some way renewed, strengthened, freed and perhaps even transformed.

The dead once knew our language. In those 15 weeks that we spent together around the seminar table, we tried to learn their language, to speak the language of death, but now it was time to bid the dead farewell. The spring was upon us. The final presentations had come to an end. We threw open the windows.

A warm wind passed us by.

Endnotes

- ¹ Aidan Kavanagh, *The Elements of Rite*. New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1982, 28.
- ² Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts is the undergraduate college of the New School University, located in Greenwich Village in New York City. Our students are traditional college age (18-25), largely from outside of New York. Many are especially drawn to writing and the arts, and they welcome the prospect of engaging with the diversity to be found in an urban context.
- ³ This seminar would meet twice weekly for 15 weeks, each class lasting for 100 minutes.
- ⁴ Mark Rothko, 1957.
- ⁵ Kavanagh, 13.
- ⁶ This term was helpfully offered by Dr. Alan Mandell in a telephone conversation, January 30, 2008.
- ⁷ Lang seminars generally cap enrollment at 18 students. The first time that this course was offered, there were 11 enrolled. This term (spring 2008), the course has an enrollment of 20.
- ⁸ Kavanagh, 5.
- ⁹ Kavanagh, 58.
- ¹⁰ *The Book of Common Prayer*, The Church Hymnal Corporation and the Seabury Press, 1977, *The Burial of the Dead: Rite Two*, 499.
- ¹¹ Paraphrase and quotation from the ethical will of Jacob Krueger. (All direct quotes are cited with permission of their author.)
- ¹² Paraphrase and quotation from the ethical will of Jacob Krueger.
- ¹³ Paraphrase from the ethical will of Danielle Shimkus.
- ¹⁴ Paraphrase from the ethical will of Roslyn Avent.
- ¹⁵ Paraphrase and quotation from the ethical will of Jacob Krueger.
- ¹⁶ Quotation from the ethical will of James Marks.
- ¹⁷ Paraphrase and quotation from the ethical will of Jacob Krueger.
- ¹⁸ Paraphrase and quotation from the ethical will of Jacob Krueger.
- ¹⁹ Kavanagh, 54.
- ²⁰ All ultimately elected to work individually.
- ²¹ James Marks, final project paper, May, 2007.
- ²² Aria Boutet, "Spontaneous Shrines and Communal Memory-Making," 5 May 2007.

Katherine Kurs, a 1983 graduate of Empire State College, also has a M.Div. from the Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from The Royal College of Art (London).

Reflections on Learning and Educational Planning

Frieda Mendelsohn, Niagara Frontier Center

“Degree program planning is at the heart of Empire State College’s educational philosophy and embodies the college’s ideas about student-centered education.”* It also is the most challenging process for mentors and students to learn. In my own case, I’ve been working with students in this process for about 25 years and I’m still learning.

In the next few years, an increasing number of new mentors will join us at the same time that our most experienced colleagues will leave the college (and take their knowledge with them). Meanwhile, the college is in the process of creating and developing a new Center for Mentoring and Learning. This seems a good moment to think about what we know, how we learned it and how we’ll pass it on. In this essay, I discuss the ways in which I’ve learned, as well as from whom I’ve learned. I then describe the blended, guided independent study Educational Planning ANGEL project I started during my reassignment to the Mentoring Institute (RIP) in 2006 - 2007, and show how visualization of the process helps students comprehend the complexity inherent in it. Finally, I call on all of us to both share what we’ve learned and develop new, collaborative ways of continuing our own development as mentors.

HOW I LEARNED

I gained my introduction to educational planning through college materials and as a result of conversations with my

colleagues. When I reflect on my approaches now, however, it is clear to me that my academic and professional background and experiences, as well as the students with whom I’ve worked over the years, also have made significant contributions to my understanding.

Learning from Mentors

I was introduced to educational planning by my “buddy mentor.” After reading college materials and discussing them with him, he invited me to share a student.

We interviewed the student together and discussed the results after each session; in effect, I was mentored in the process. After that first student, I did much of the research I asked my students to do (at the time, this meant getting hard copies of college catalogs as well as contacting relevant professional organizations for printed material); I consulted with my buddy, other faculty or the center assessment person when I had questions; and I served on center assessment committees where I learned from my colleagues how to think about and evaluate the results of the educational planning process that each student’s portfolio presented to us.

Each center’s processes for assessment committees vary somewhat. At Niagara Frontier Center, an assessment committee consists of three primary mentors. Each of us reads each of the 8 - 10 portfolios before the two-hour meeting; at that meeting, we discuss each case, come to a shared decision about the program and accompanying materials, and draft language to explain our decision to the student. During our discussion, we explain our reasoning, refer to policies, and ask questions of each other. It is an excellent opportunity for new academic employees to be introduced to degree portfolios and, as many of us have learned, to the core of academic work at Empire State College.

Over the years, I’ve attended faculty meetings, workshops, regional and college-wide meetings, and discussed educational planning with a wide range of mentors. In addition, for the past three years, I worked with new mentors in their orientation to the college. Not only have I learned from others more experienced than I, but my work with new mentors always teaches me something by seeing the process from new perspectives.

Learning from our Academic and Professional Backgrounds

Each of us comes to Empire State College with our own academic background; we each have been taught habits of mind, which lead us to define problems, organize information and reason through to solutions in a particular way. My observations at various workshops, meetings and discussions have led me to the conclusion that our academic disciplines greatly influence the way we each approach educational planning. For example, a writer might use autobiography as a way into the study, while a psychologist might start with “learning about learning.” In my own case, my academic background is in economics; in addition, my professional interests have led me to the study and practice of design, usability and accessibility of web sites.

*As an economist,
I think of degree program
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decision making, the goal
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subject to the constraints.*

* Degree Program Planning and Educational Philosophy, *Mentorsite*, Mentoring Institute, Empire State College. http://www.esc.edu/esonline/across_esc/mentorsite2.nsf/3cc42a422514347a8525671d0049f395/df73a78a287c4e9285256ef8006de7dd?OpenDocument.

As an economist, I think of degree program planning as an exercise in economic decision making. In economic decision making, the goal is to optimize something given available resources subject to the constraints. In degree program planning, the “something” is the student’s preferences regarding the future. What are the student’s goals? What would the student like to learn? Why? “Resources” available to the student are the mentors and adjuncts across the college and the added resources that I can bring to the student through tutors and adjuncts as well as through cross registration. Other resources are the credits available from transcripts and potential credits from experiential learning. Finally, the “constraints” are imposed by the student, in the form of time and money available to pursue this degree; by the college, in the form of numbers of credits of various sorts, depth and progression of the concentration, etc.; by SUNY, particularly by the general education requirements, and by external audiences, such as potential graduate schools, employers and/or professional expectations.

For me, the organizing framework for educational planning is quite clear: first we identify the preferences, then we identify the constraints, and then we identify the tradeoffs and decision points so that the student can choose the best option for herself.

In addition to my background as an economist, over the past several years, I have studied web design, both as a practitioner at the Center for Learning and Technology (CLT) and as a mentor working with students. One of the “rules” in designing web sites is that an organizational

framework works for the user only if she shares a common understanding with the designer. For me, the organizing framework for educational planning is quite clear: first we identify the preferences, then we identify the constraints, and then we identify the tradeoffs and decision points so that the student can choose the best option for herself.

Oddly enough, however, my students don’t see degree program planning as a problem in economic decision making! Nor do they have a clear idea of what this study entails after reading my four-page learning contract. The question remains: How can I help students navigate their individual educational planning journey, given the degree of complexity and ambiguity of the process?

Learning from Students

A lot of what I’ve learned about educational planning has come from my interactions with my students. They’ve shared with me the results of their curricular and professional research, their experiential learning, and their knowledge of a variety of careers and workplaces.

Not only have these experiences with students helped me learn about life (I’ve come to know a lot of interesting people I would never have met and had conversations about areas of life that have enriched my own), they also have given me a richer background on which to draw in my conversations with succeeding students as they have engaged this educational planning process. I have learned a great deal about various subjects (both by supervising the credit by evaluation [CBE] process and by reading the resulting evaluator’s reports). I have found that this knowledge is both interesting in itself and useful in working with other students as they develop their own degree programs.

What do I know?

Educational planning is a complex process requiring a range of knowledge and skills. It seems to me that what I know can be generalized as follows: I know college policies and procedures (either I know them or know how to find them), how to find a variety of kinds of information relevant to

students as they plan, how to interpret and translate what students bring me from their research (or whom to ask to help me do so), and some specific knowledge about various fields that has come through my own and my students’ reading and our conversations together. I also know that I need to continue to work on my interviewing and listening skills and strive to give students time to ask their questions and answer my questions.

What is useful for students to know?

Clearly, students also need a wide range of knowledge to be successful in educational planning. This knowledge ranges from the nuts and bolts of how to plan the degree and enter it in DP Planner, to the self-knowledge needed to articulate one’s goals. While I can explain the general education requirements to them or show them how to use DP Planner, I certainly can’t explain their own goals to them (although my reflection of their goals back to them is frequently useful to their self-knowledge).

Students generally do not come to educational planning with knowledge of what makes a good curriculum, how knowledge is defined in academia (as opposed to the workplace), nor with the vocabulary of academia in general, and Empire State College in particular, that they need to interpret what they find through their research. On the other hand, many students come to this study with significant knowledge of the workplace and its expectations, with a vocabulary and way of thinking based on their professional experiences, and with an understanding of subject matter about which I may know nothing.

While some students come to educational planning with a good sense of what they want to accomplish and what new academic experiences might help them accomplish their goals, other students need to work through various activities to learn this about themselves. Overall, while I can’t answer these questions for them, I can support their attempts to answer these questions with resources, learning activities and on-going conversation, whether face-to-face or online. For me, this kind of support is at the center of educational planning.

BLENDING LEARNING IN EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

Educational planning is a complex process with a steep learning curve for mentors and for students. I can only accomplish so much in my face-to-face meetings with students. Even if they listen to what I say and take careful notes, even if I do my best to listen to them and to every question and concern they raise, meetings two to four weeks apart are not much support for their work. I consider myself a resource in the work of planning the degree, crafting CBE requests and developing readiness for learning. Other resources exist (student planning guide, workshops from the Office of Academic Review [OAR], etc.); however, for me, the foundation on which all of this rests is a sustained “conversation” between mentor and student.

But what is a sustained conversation? Is it a meeting every two to four weeks? On what does the student rely between those meetings? Are the printed materials and the college’s web site sufficient to support their work?

Over the last two years, I’ve been working on a project to use online resources to support my individual work with students in educational planning. This project is based on the premises that

- educational planning requires a sustained conversation between the mentor and student;
- this conversation works best for me when it is face-to-face;
- this conversation works best for students when there are opportunities for continuing contact, as well as clear written materials, available between meetings;
- contact can be managed, recorded and supported with online resources; and
- each student’s path through educational planning and, therefore, through those online resources, depends on the specific goals, background, objectives, etc. for the individual student.

My Center for Distance Learning (CDL) Experience

In 2005 - 2006, I was asked to teach “Exploring the Disciplines: Information Systems” (Exploring IS) for CDL. This course, originally developed by Diane Shichtman, Joyce Munro and Betty Lawrence, is one of several 2-credit options designed to be companions to CDL’s “Planning and Finalizing the Degree,” also 2 credits. As part of this mentor assignment, I was asked to bring what I know about educational planning to strengthen the course. As is true with all learning, the experience also gave me new ideas for my work with students in educational planning at my home center.

The learning objectives of Exploring IS are (1) to learn how to learn about a discipline and how that disciplinary knowledge is related to other fields of knowledge as well as the workplace; and (2) to learn about the various fields in information systems and technology. This course implemented a systematic strategy of moving from the student’s comfort zone (job descriptions) through related fields, to the roles of liberal studies in supporting their understanding of their field. Students with whom I worked in this course seemed to develop a real appreciation of the potential for liberal studies to increase their understanding of workplace issues. I wanted to include this strategy in my face-to-face work with students.

Version 1: CourseSpace

Building on the Exploring IS experience, I developed a CourseSpace database for the fall 2006 term. I wanted to incorporate the materials and strategy I learned from Exploring IS; however, I wanted the site to support my individual work with students rather than become a pre-written learning experience. What resulted was a set of activities, which looked very much like a course. This was not at all what I had in mind! Instead, what I wanted was a space where we could work together between meetings, where I could put a link (to their own DP Planner, to specific curricular guidelines, etc.), where I could have a discussion with the student, where the student could turn in drafts, and where

I could put pre-written explanations of the nuts and bolts of educational planning (e.g., how to use DP Planner). I wanted each student’s experience in educational planning to be individual; however, I also wanted to reuse materials when they were appropriate, as well as collect all of our conversations in one place.

... I wanted the site to support my individual work with students rather than become a pre-written learning experience.

Version 2: ANGEL with “individual folders”

In January 2007, the college converted to the ANGEL learning environment. This change in technology platform gave me the opportunity to design a new model to support my work with students. This time, I designed a site where each student’s web space would be different, but I would be able to easily add the appropriate learning activities and resources as the student and I worked through the process. This all made a great deal of sense in the abstract: each student would see only those materials that supported her particular study; I would be able to write something once and use it many times.

This was not a successful experiment. First, the attempt to add resources during my meetings with students was distracting for both of us; it interrupted the conversation and confused both of us. To make things worse, I didn’t have a standard organizational scheme, so that we both had difficulty figuring out where I had literally “put things” on the student’s web space. It was clear that I needed to reorganize the site.

Version 3: The Concept Map

One of the little-known “perks” of a Mentoring Institute (RIP) reassignment was the monthly conversations among the two recipients and Alan Mandell. We usually met by telephone; however, in May 2007, the three of us were able to have breakfast together (with Internet access) when our travel schedules synchronized. Sometimes telephone conversations just aren’t enough; in this case, the fact that we were able to view the web site and discuss it together led to an important breakthrough: Julie Shaw (the other recipient that year) suggested that I use a “concept map” to visualize the web site.

The concept map was a significant breakthrough. First, it helped me rethink my understanding of educational planning, the various resources and activities I use with students, their purposes for student learning, and the connections among them all. The requirement that everything belong *somewhere* in the concept map required me to not only identify my reasons for including activities or resources in this study but also to specify the connections.

For example, in the educational planning work, I had included two different kinds of library tasks; this process made me realize that there was a distinction between the library and skills assessment work that students do to enhance their readiness for learning and the library work they do to develop professional resources that they’ll use throughout their lifelong learning. Both the student and I needed to understand both the differences in the activities and the different purposes they served in an educational planning study.

After I mapped the content for my site, I spent some time writing and arranging the various pieces. The plan of the site was now clearer to me, and I could use the map to explain the design and to map a path for each student. Still, the site was complex and, no matter how I tried, I couldn’t come up with a navigation scheme for the web site that met my criteria for web site usability: it was just too easy to get lost among the various folders and pages (there were too many “clicks” to get to the information). Even including the concept map on the front

page and specifically referring to sections of it throughout the site, were not enough.

Epiphany!

Finally, I realized that there was no need for the site to stand alone; instead, since the site was always intended as a support for our face-to-face meetings, there must be a way to put all of these pieces together. To my surprise, the answer to navigating this complex site turned out to be a copy of the concept map printed on 11” x 17” paper.

What I do now:

At our first face-to-face meeting, I give the student the learning contract. This is four-pages long and has a variety of options in it, which we discuss after the student has read the contract. While the student is reading this document, I give her access to the web site; after the student asks questions about the contract, I hand her a copy of the concept map. We discuss the map, the connection of the map to the contract, and the connection of both to the web site.

My next “ah hah” moment came when I realized that I could write on the student’s copy of the map! Rather than relying only on the student’s memory or notes from our meeting, I could write on the map (using a different colored pen at each meeting) to indicate just where the student would be working until our next meeting. It is this handwritten note on a paper copy of the map that helps the student easily navigate through the web site and the entire study.

The site

As you can see from figure 1, I have broken down the tasks in educational planning to looking backward to identify potential prior learning and looking forward to identify goals, research ways of reaching those goals, assess readiness for learning (with an emphasis on online library skills and documentation), and prepare for lifelong professional development. I also have left room for what I hope will eventually be links to other mentors’ work (e.g., in independent learning strategies and learning about learning). The map shows that some of these sections are more fully developed than others; what you may not see is how much of my colleagues’ work

is incorporated, either as self-contained “handouts” with attribution or as approaches that I learned from others over the years.

How is it working? I certainly cannot say that every student finishes the contract during the term. I can, however, say that those who see me on a regular basis do bring the concept map with them, that it’s clear that they use it to navigate the site, and that, above all, the visualization of this complex set of information makes a difference to their understanding of the entire process. Most important, the complexity of the map helps students comprehend that the process is, indeed, complex. For many students, this visualization of educational planning reduces the ambiguity and, therefore, the anxiety of the study.

SHARING WITH, AND LEARNING FROM, EACH OTHER

As we’ve all heard many times, a significant portion of our full-time faculty is “seasoned;” in other words, in 10 years, many of us will no longer be mentoring at Empire State College. While some of what we have learned over the years may not be useful or appropriate for the college in 10 or 20 years, we like to think that what we’ve learned will still be available, as appropriate, to future generations of mentors and learners.

Having said that, we’re still here and we can continue to learn. We can learn from our more experienced colleagues, we can learn from our newest colleagues, we can learn from the literature and we can learn from our students.

In order to do that, however, we need to be able to easily share what we do and what we know. We need a space to share our materials and we need space to support conversation. We need ways of both getting recognition for the ideas we have and for the suggestions that we make. We also need regular opportunities to continue developing our work using what we’ve learned from others.

With ANGEL, we now have the technology to build a “Mentor Learning Object Repository (LOR)” – a space where we can demonstrate our work to everyone who

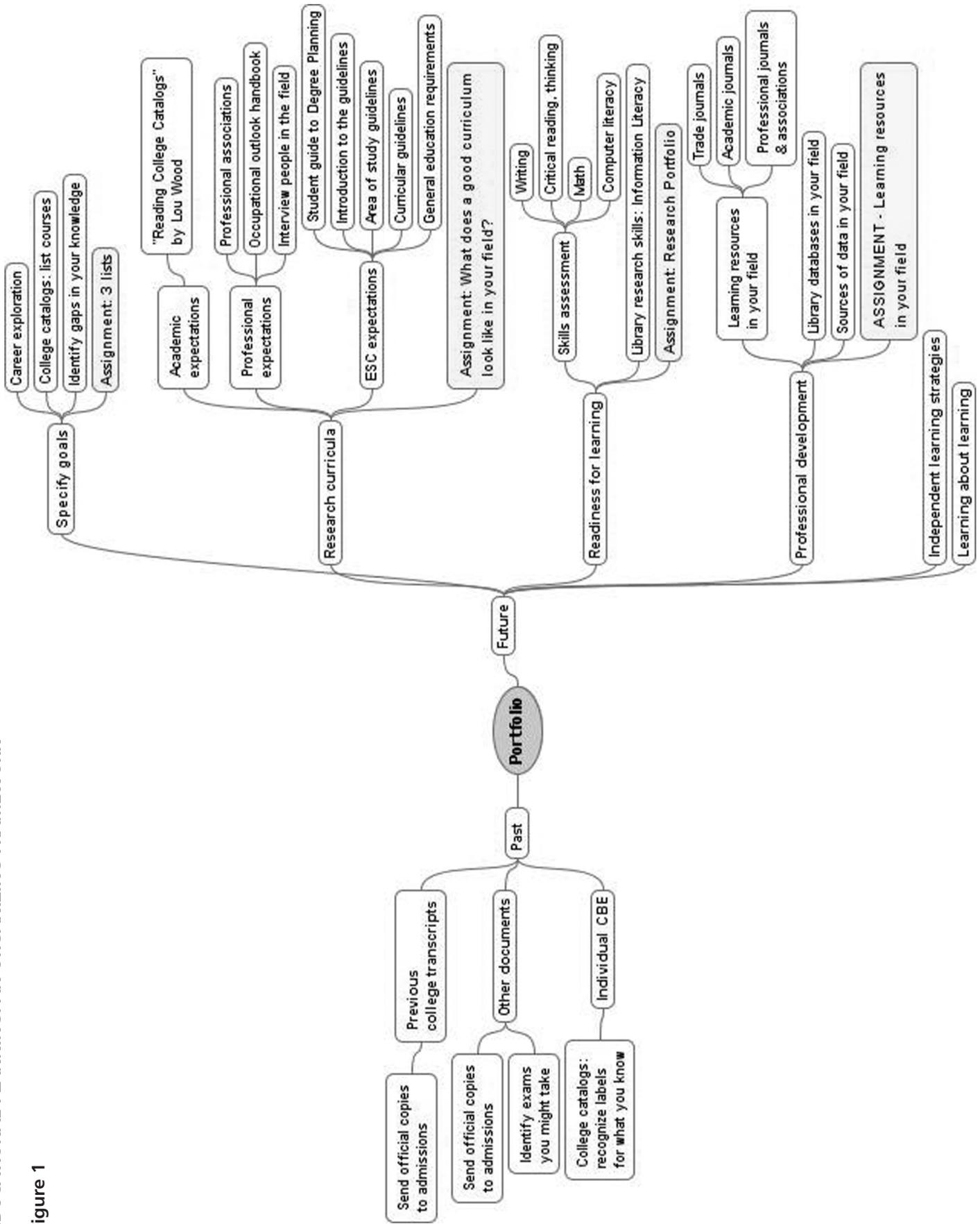
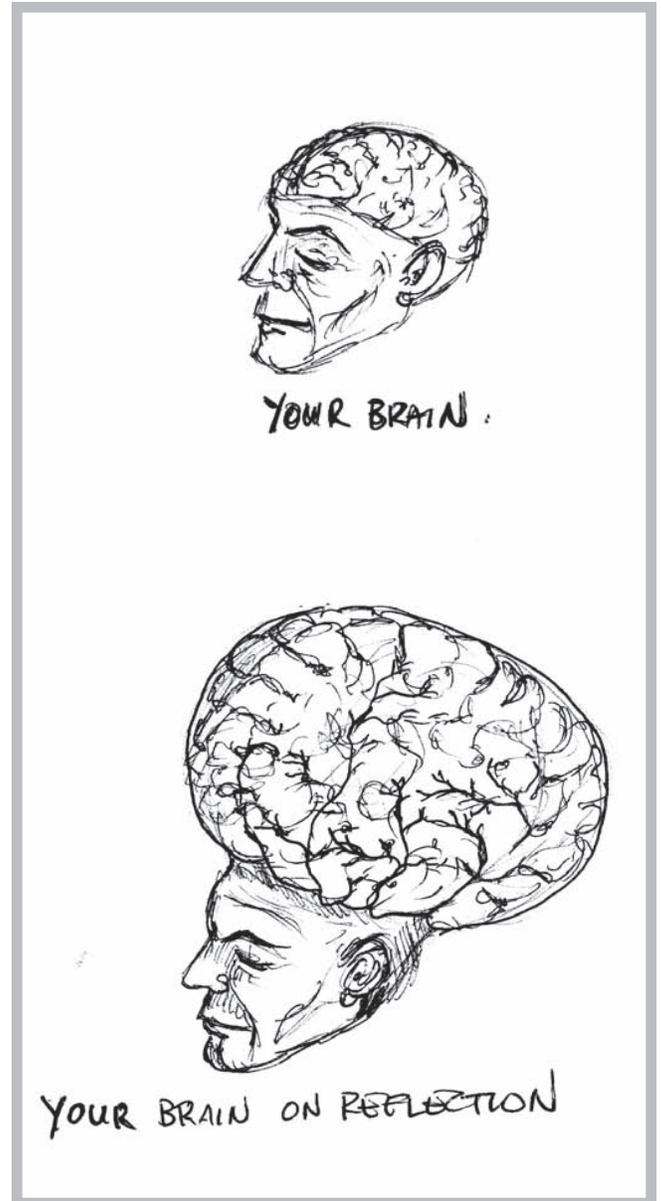


Figure 1

has access to the space. Some of the items that we could share are articles, exercises, materials and other “learning activities” that individual mentors have developed and/or used with their students. Such an LOR could serve as a resource for training new mentors as well as a way to publish our work with credit that people deserve.

But having the technology isn’t enough. We need both the desire to share our work and the skills and time to make that happen. One incentive that might increase our desire to share would be the recognition of internal publication of our work in the personnel review process. But even with increased desire to share and to learn from the work of others, we still need instructional design resources available at all of our locations and, above all, time – time to think, to reflect, to learn and to share. It is through our collaboration among ourselves and with our students that we will continue to learn.



Spontaneous sketch by Gerry Lorentz, Northeast Center, at the All College Conference, 2008.

Playing with PLAI: A Discussion with Barry Sheckley

Nan Travers, Office of Collegewide Academic Review

What follows is an edited version of an interview with Barry G. Sheckley, The Neag Professor of Adult Learning in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. Over the last 25 years, Sheckley has written extensively on the areas of adult and experiential learning and offered workshops dealing with learning in the classroom and in workplaces of all kinds. Among many honors, Barry Sheckley received the Morris T. Keeton Award for Contributions to the Field of Adult and Experiential Learning in 2003.

Travers: Would you begin by talking about how adult learning theory is becoming shaped by what we know about how the brain works?

Sheckley: It's interesting you mention "adult learning theory." I wonder about this phrase: "adult learning theory." As far as I can tell, there really is no one "theory of adult learning." There are numerous perspectives on this phenomenon – including perspectives on why adults participate in formal learning programs, what motivates adults to learn, transformative learning, learning and development, characteristics of adult learners and related topics. These many different perspectives are necessary perhaps because adults are such a widely heterogeneous and diverse group of learners. They cannot be shoehorned into one theory.

Back to the brain: I'm finding that the emerging research on the brain provides a great window into the adult learning process. Anyone who reads this research just has to be awed. The brain is so incredible. Actually no one really knows what goes on in the brain. The process is fascinating and mysterious. The research on the brain has led me to think in terms of an acronym, Professional Learning as Inquiry or PLAI.

Why play – or PLAI? The research on what happens over the lifetime in the learning process highlights a great difference between



Barry Sheckley

kids and adults. Think of kids when they are young. They play. They're always exploring and trying to acquire information to solve the puzzle of how to live in the world. As they start to accumulate that understanding, they get good at things. Somewhere in their lifespan – as they get better and better at doing things – they stop exploring and they just rely on doing the things they're good at. We could think of this as a continuum where, at one end, young kids are in a constant information acquisition stage and, at the other end are seniors who may spend their time doing what they're good at. In doing so they spend less energy acquiring information. In a sense, they're a polar opposite of young kids. They're not playing.

Travers: And this "continuum" is linked to brain activity?

Sheckley: What happens when a person stops playing – stops actively exploring the world? The brain actually will start to decrease in size. Researchers tell us that each day the brain "reinvents" itself. Let's think of this: when we wake up in the morning, our brain is like a Volkswagen Beetle car. By the end of the day through experiences or thoughts and events, there's a great deal

of energy invested in constructing new connections. At day's end the brain has added size and energy – it's almost as if the brain has expanded from a Beetle into a Hummer. It's actually grown in size, energy and power. But if that growth continued every day, the brain would literally outgrow the skull. So what happens? As we sleep, the brain literally tidies up; it maintains the same relative strength among synapses but it gets rid of – prunes – ones that are not necessary. So when we wake up the next morning we're no longer a Hummer, we're a Beetle, but one that is more finely tuned. This happens on a day-to-day basis.

When people get into professions and as they age, they start spending all this time on what they do best, instead of learning new things and having new experiences. The brain uses existing connections. New ones are not formed. When they do not engage continually in new experiences – when they stop playing – the growth of the brain and their learning can stagnate.

Travers: So new experiences are crucial for learning.

Sheckley: Yes, for vitality, individuals have to keep the brain engaged in new experiences, in acquiring new information as opposed to just reaffirming what it already knows how to do best. This is a PLAI issue: how to keep the brain constantly engaged in learning – how to keep it vital by inquiring into new ideas, by making sense of new experiences.

The other thing that research on the brain tells us is that, because the brain is always reinventing itself, learning has to be a constant process. A one-time data dump does not work. There has to be constant revisiting, constant engagement and constant play with this information.

The second thing research tells us is how neurons are actually strengthened – this is a key idea. The only way neurons are

strengthened is through direct experience. Over and over in the research you'll see this phrase: neurons that fire together wire together. The process begins with direct experience – an event that makes neurons fire. This is the only data that the brain has to work with – the firing of neurons, an event that records what happens to the body.

Here we have the marvel of consciousness: the brain takes the neural impulses from direct experience and converts them via coordination among several different systems within the brain into consciousness. We really don't know how that happens, but we know that there are several different systems within the brain that are involved. We also know that experience is the foundation of the whole process. You could say that the brain is an organ that only "learns" from direct experience.

We also know that experience is the foundation of the whole process. You could say that the brain is an organ that only "learns" from direct experience.

What happens to the body (experience) is what we convert into knowledge. Research actually shows that there are changes in the neural synapses, in the neural receptors and in the RNA of a nucleus when the body encounters a powerful experience. In other words, unless you have the synapse firing, the strengthening is not happening. Experience is the basis of strengthening a synapse. In turn, the strengthening of neural synapses is a fundamental component of the "memory." And, in turn, memory is an aspect of the learning process. The message here is that experience is essential for learning.

Travers: There's acquisition of information; there's experience. But is it about experiencing *anything*? Will any experience do?

Sheckley: There is a third issue that's intriguing about the brain. It's the mystery of how the brain self-organizes. The best description I've found on this is one from Tononi who uses the term "neural Darwinism." Selectivity derives from attention, or what the brain deems as important enough to attend to at any point in time. According to this idea, there are billions of synapses all competing for attention, and somehow one collection – one network – emerges perhaps because it has more "strength" at that moment. Think of a small stage in an auditorium and think of billions of people trying to get on this little stage. Who gets the spotlight? The strongest set of actors gets the stage.

The marvel of the brain is that at any one moment in time the brain optimizes the life of the body by selecting for attention the pattern of neural impulses that are going to be the most adaptive. In effect, the brain at this point figures out what is the most optimal. There's no algorithm in it, there's no preprogramming in it. The selection seems to be based on the brain's ability to link current situations with past experiences. The process seems to be based on analogical reasoning – how is this situation similar to, analogous to, a prior situation that was optimal?

Travers: Education then is about selectivity.

Sheckley: When we think about education, we have to figure out how to enable this selectivity process. There are two things we have to do: we have to build up the experiences that contribute to a reservoir of patterns that can be recalled, and then we have to work with individuals to help them understand how to make selections – how to optimize selections from among the billions of possibilities that are available in any one second. A great deal of our education is set on the idea that goes something like this:

"We're gonna teach you this information, it's gonna go into your brain. You'll store it in something like an Excel file. It's gonna stay there forever exactly as I just taught it to you, and when I ask you what you know, you're gonna be able to give back what I taught you, and if you give it back to me that way, that tells me you know

it; if you don't give it back to me, that says you don't know it."

In addition, there also is a misunderstanding of the "file." There's an interesting discussion in the research about a "grandmother" neuron. Is there one neuron that, when grandma walks in the room, just fires? Is there a one-to-one relationship between what happens in the world and what happens in the brain? A great deal of our education is built upon the idea that there is a "grandmother" neuron. As this idea is translated into practice it takes this form: "we're gonna expose you to information that you'll put into your brain; it's gonna be recorded down in one neuron; and when you have to recall it, that neuron's gonna fire."

Travers: Is the "grandmother" neuron theory true?

Sheckley: No! Grandma can walk in the room and she can have a scarf on, she can have makeup on – there can be thousands of different variations of grandma, and yet the brain is able to still recognize grandma – and differentiate her from pretenders.

So how does this amazing feat happen? The process is simple, yet elegant. Whatever we "represent" in the brain is not represented by just one neuron – or even just one set of neurons. Instead ideas, events, notions, experiences are recorded and "represented" as networks of networks of networks. For example, we may have one network that represents grandma as we generally see her. One part of the network may record features of her height. Another may record features of her face, a third may record features of her movements, a fourth may record features of her speech, a fifth may record features of her hand gestures, and so on. So if she comes into a room with a scarf on and sunglasses on, the networks representing her face and hair might not fire – or respond. But the other networks will fire. We'll "recognize" – literally re-cognize – grandma because of the combination of networks responding to her pattern of movement, her hand gestures, her speech patterns, and so on. Because of the sunglasses and scarf, there may not be a perfect match. But because of the redundancy among the networks, the pattern that is attended to or selected from a million

other possibilities – the one with the greatest strength – is the pattern associated with the concept “grandma.”

Travers: So do the most used networks, the almost “perfect matches,” continue to get selected?

Sheckley: The brain has a great ability to compensate for its shortcomings. For example, when confronted with a task – recognizing grandma with sunglasses and a scarf – it has less than perfect knowledge of the situation. It also has a limited capacity to process via the so-called “working memory” all of the information available to it as grandma walks into the room. (To give you an idea of how limited working memory is, some estimates say the limit is three to five bits of information at any one time.) Because of these limits, the brain has evolved to compensate by forming “models” of how the world works. This is a very adaptive feature of the brain.

When grandma walks into the room with sunglasses and a scarf, we have this mental model of grandma based on prior experience. Armed with this model, we do not have to process every bit of information that is coming into the brain about this person in sunglasses and a scarf; all we have to do is “pattern match.” Does the pattern that is presenting itself for this person with sunglasses and a scarf provide a workable match with our mental model of “grandma?” If so, all is well. We proceed to greet grandma, lovingly. If not, then we search for, and select, another pattern that provides a better match.

At any one point in time, we have to do something, we have an image or a model in our mind of what it should look like. We continually compare our performance to what is modeled. When we do something like bounce a ball, or hit a golf ball, or make a pasta sauce, we’ll watch what happens, and if it happens to go really well, we think, “yeah, that’s how it’s done.” Repeated experiences of this nature serve to consolidate, to expand, and to add breadth to the model.

If something doesn’t go well, however, we say “well that’s not what I want.” These experiences also add to the mental model.

In any event, we always have these ideas in our mind that are mental models of how the world works. These models enable selectivity. We use these mental models to set up expectations. When we enter a situation, based on our prior experiences, we set up expectations and see how well the pattern of events within the situation are aligning with our expectations. To make sense of the situation, we try to select from the pattern of new information that’s coming in that best fits with the models that we already have in place. To accomplish this fit, we constantly adapt our models to the new information or the new information to the models.

Travers: So as we age, are there just more models that are in place?

Sheckley: What happens when people age is they often tend to depend on their existing models and ignore contrary information. This is sometimes referred to as the law of large numbers. If a pattern – or set of expectations – has been confirmed by 2,000+ prior events, it has credence.

If we can get adults into the playfulness of learning – get them to engage in rich, new experiences, then they may encounter situations where their expectations – and mental models – are violated. In turn, such violations can prompt them to incorporate new ideas into their mental models, or change their mental models to build from the new experience.

When the adults engage in this process of playing with new experiences, inquiring about how to handle situations differently, the brain is awash with chemicals like adrenaline, dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin that literally tune the brain, make it vibrant and alert. During this learning process, the whole body lights up, there is a radiant vitality that permeates a learner’s entire being. Little kids have this aura about them – they’re curious and open, you can actually see the vitality in their lives. When you contrast that to someone like the older person who is taking in information but using the existing model of how it works to use as a filter, and saying “I only will take in stuff that agrees with this pattern, and the rest I’ll ignore,” the adrenaline and the oxytocin don’t flow. We lose the vitality because the brain just isn’t as “alive.”

Perhaps this phenomenon is linked to the phrase “grumpy old men.”

Travers: So these models include everything that we know?

Evidence is that we’re really only aware of probably 30 percent of what we know: 70 percent is tacit or nonconscious. This idea is shown over and over in the research. For example, one of the latest studies I was reading on this topic focused on surgeons in a medical hospital. Researchers were filming them as they were teaching students how to do surgery. The researchers then watched the surgeons actually do surgery. Surprisingly, the researchers found that while the surgeons were doing surgery, they were actually doing things that they hadn’t told the students to do, or what they did was contrary to what they told the students to do. When the researchers replayed video tapes of the surgery, they stopped the tape at these points and asked: “Why are you doing this? You told the students to do this differently?” The doctors responded: “I wasn’t aware that that’s what I actually did in surgery.” In their interviewing they asked the surgeons, “Well when you’re talking to the students about what to do in surgery, how do you get this information?” And the surgeons responded, “Well I try to make this picture of watching myself while I’m doing this.”

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But the point is this: there is a great deal of what we know that we use as the basis to make a selection among the millions of neural impulses that are happening at a point, so much so, that we’re not aware of

most of it. It's information and knowledge embedded in the mental model of how the world works, how we want things to happen based upon the experiences that we've have. And through those experiences, we learn a great deal of knowledge implicitly – knowledge that was literally tangled within the experience. This knowledge is embedded in neural networks as tacit, or nonconscious knowledge. This is the 70 percent of our knowledge that's of this type: we have it, we use it, but we're not aware of having or using it. This is just another of the many marvels of the brain.

Travers: What happens when we do find ourselves in a new situation?

Sheckley: This is another fascinating feature of how the mind works. When we come into a new situation, we literally remember it as a past experience. This process is adaptive. For example, when students come into my classes, I'll tell them the first night, "Right now you are remembering me as an amalgam of professors you've had in other classes. I could stop right now and you could give me the script of how this night's going to go and how the rest of the course is going to go: we are going to review the syllabus, it'll have a bunch of readings, there will be a midterm, a final, you'll have to write a paper. The script is already there, you're ready to play it out. That's very adaptive for you because now all you have to do is pay attention to how I deviate from that expectation."

Using the mental models it has derived from prior experience, in new situations, all the brain has to do is be aware of the deviations from the expectations it has for the situation. When everything falls into place, it's very adaptive to have this remembered present. When you engage in a new situation, you don't have to process every bit of information about the situation. You just have to look for the deviations.

Now, let's go back to the issue of how we help people learn. The often-used model of the brain as a computer, a device composed of "grandmother" neurons, or a device that takes and stores pictures as if it were a digital camera – says all we have to do is take information and put it onto PowerPoint – all we have to do is organize key bits of knowledge and present them to students.

These bits of knowledge get assimilated into a neural pathway and stored as a photograph or as a neuron or as a computer file. And then when the right time comes (e.g., the final exam), all learners have to do is find the folder name or the right index and pull the information out and use it. Our assumption is that all teachers have to do is to load the mind up with all this information and then students will be able to recall it at a later time.

Travers: But from what you've said, that model of teaching and learning isn't consistent with how the brain actually works.

Sheckley: Right, this model just doesn't fly. If we were going to set up an instructional program that aligned with how the brain actually worked, this program would have three key features.

First, the learning process would be constant because the brain rewires itself every day.

Second, learners would be comparing new ideas with their existing mental models. The comparative issue is important because a new idea will not typically be assimilated unless it's compared with a learner's current expectations of how a pattern will unfold in some kind of practice experience-based situation. For this reason, I always start a course by finding out the students' ideas of how the world works as this model relates to the ideas we'll cover in the course. In a course on adult learning, I may start off with the question: "How does learning happen? What is the process?" I'll have them actually draw a map that illustrates the process.

Travers: So, you're not beginning with information but with questions.

Sheckley: Whatever the situation, I always begin with a question about their mental models because I want to see how the students are thinking; then I know how they're "remembering" this situation. I do my best to start with their mental model as a given and work from there. If I present them with information that doesn't fit with that model, if the gap is too wide, the information is too discordant, they're going to throw it away. So I have to figure out how to start with their own mental model and how I'm going to weave this

new information into a model that they are taking for granted.

You can see one example of the shift in mental models in a project where we worked with teachers who wanted to learn how to get students to do the homework that was assigned. I began by asking them to draw a concept map of all the factors they thought were related to the task of completing homework. Only one of the 29 maps had the word "teacher" on it. The other 28 maps indicated that homework completion was a problem of the *student*.

If I had started my work with these teachers by talking about issues like "mastery" versus "performance" learning, or allowing choice for students in homework assignments, they would have likely replied: "Why are you talking about me and my homework assignments? Why aren't you talking about how to motivate students? They are the problem."

So I first had to figure out how to change their mental model about effective teaching, about students and about homework. That is where the comparison process came in. I had to say to them:

"OK, here's an idea. What if on your next homework assignment, you set up elements of choice?"

"What do you mean choice, what kinds of choice?"

"You tell me: What choices could you give?"

Somebody said: "Well the only choice we could give would be about what day of the week the homework is due."

"That's a start, can you try that? What would happen if you just built that in?"

So I pushed them to basically compare their idea of how the world works with a different way of working with students. I wanted to engage them in a different pattern, a different experience.

In this case, many of them came back with great surprise because they thought that when they put this choice out there, the students were going to blow it off. But actually the students said: "You know this is really wonderful, because I was afraid you were going to have it due on Wednesday

because on Tuesday night I have this, or Thursday I was going to go here.” All of a sudden homework went from a 60 percent completion rate to a 90 percent rate as a result of that little change. The opportunity to compare a theoretical idea – choice enhances learning – with an actual experience using the idea enhanced their learning. They experienced the positive results first hand.

I had to then make the comparison process constant. So I gave them another idea, one related to self-regulation. They compared this idea to actual practice. Again the results were positive. To enhance their learning, I engaged them in process in which they constantly compared ideas from research and theory with specific applications in practice. I tried to engage them in playful process of inquiry in which they explored how ideas based on theory and research played out in practice.

Travers: It seems that the content seems less important than engaging them in a process that builds complexity into their mental models.

Sheckley: My intent the whole way was about using the content as a way to expand the mental models that they used to guide their practice. Basically, I know that the mental models that learners use are the ones that they are going to resort to when selecting a way to address problems or issues. If I can help them build complexity into their mental models – complexity in terms of using a broader array of lenses to view problem situations – when they encounter problems, and they have to “select” the best option to address the problem, they would have a wider set of choices from which to view the situation. In the case of the teachers, by the end of the project they had a number of choices to use in viewing the problem: “Do I want to look at this homework problem as a *performance* issue? Do I want to look at this as a *mastery* issue? Do I want to look at this as a *choice* issue? Do I want to look at this as a *self-regulation* issue? Do I want to look at this as a *standards* issue?” I was trying to build choices into the selection process. I was trying to help them build up the breadth and complexity of the mental model that they use to make their selections or choices of optimal behaviors in this

arena. The content became a means to the end of building up this mental model that would give them options on the selection issue. Put in another way, by putting them in multiple experiences, I built up their reservoir of possibilities. The breadth of this network that they “fired” in the mind would be bigger, and because it was integrated into one model, it was more coordinated.

The selectivity process has yet another feature. The mind has a tendency to think based on surface features. To continue with this homework assignment example: because homework is an assignment that goes home, an assignment that does not go home is not “homework.” On a surface level, an enrichment activity after school is technically not “homework.” I asked about the similarities between the after school enrichment activity and homework. Might the learning process in the enrichment activity be similar to the homework assignment? In many cases, the teachers had compartmentalized the enrichment activities as different from homework. They didn’t see the structural links. Once I got them to see that there could be a structural feature of the enrichment activities that they could transfer to homework, they began making different selections for the homework issue.

So using the constant comparative method, I used content to build up the breadth of their mental models, and then worked with them on increasing their ability to make selections based on the structural features of different experiences.

Travers: What’s obvious here is that you’re always asking your students – in this example the teachers – to think about their practice.

Sheckley: Yes. The other feature of using this comparative process – in fact, this is the third key feature of an instructional program that we were just talking about, is that when they’re comparing an idea to practice, they are actually building up their tacit knowledge via a process of *implicit* learning. The strange thing about implicit learning is that the tacit knowledge that results cannot be taught explicitly. It has to be acquired implicitly from the experience. This is another wonderful feature of the brain – its ability to pick up the patterns that are embedded in complex experiences.

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Only by getting these teachers involved in an inquiry about their practice – a situation where they actually had to use this idea in practice, could they start picking up the sense, the feel, the timing, the nuances, the contextual features about how to adapt this idea to practice.

Travers: So what you’re saying there is that by doing constant comparative inquiry you’re actually enhancing the patterns that are in the mental model, which, in turn, increases tacit knowledge.

Sheckley: Right. The debriefing of that experience becomes very important and this is where the word “reflection” comes in. I’ve tried to stay away from using the word reflection because it’s such a nebulous term – it’s amorphous. When you really try to dig down in the literature to find out what somebody means by reflection, you usually can’t find it. When I’ve debriefed these kinds of experiences, I’ve tried to practice the idea of structural mapping. I really try to get people to understand – and this is why we use the comparative process – that to develop this structural mapping skill you need to make a well-formed analogy between a new experience and a prior experience, and make it based upon structural features versus surface features. So when I debrief situations, I really try to put people in a situation and intentionally say: “Go and try out this concept or idea.” Then I will debrief it around their understanding of a structural feature or a

conceptual feature that lies at the base of the experience.

Travers: Can you give an example of this?

Sheckley: The best study that I've found on this was at Wellesley College, where they had two groups: one group of students was in a social work program and the other students were in the undergraduate program involved in a service work activity. Both groups went into the North End of Boston to work in homeless centers and soup kitchens. The service learning group basically had to log X number of hours in this soup kitchen or this homeless center per week and write a paper at the end of the semester about their experiences. The social work program students went into these experiences each week with a specific idea. For example, while they were in the homeless center one week they were asked to try to understand the complicity that existed between the community and the homeless individuals. The social work students returned to their groups to discuss this issue. Then the next week they would

go with another question, for example, how is homelessness an economic issue? How is it a political issue?

At the end of the semester, the researchers looked at the papers members of the two groups had written. A lot of the papers written by students reflecting on their service learning took the tone of victimization and blaming. On the other hand, students in the social work program came back and saw the situations through multiple frameworks. If we take this from a political perspective, here's how we're going to have to think about it; if we see this as an economic issue, if we see this as a social issue, if we see this as a communal, if we see this as a dynamic of complicity, here's what's going on. They had all these different lenses with which to think about theory and practice. Because they debriefed their experiences in terms of the structural features present, their mental models were much better structured than the students that debriefed their experiences within an amorphous notion of "reflection."

Travers: We're back to the role of experience.

Sheckley: When we put people in experiences, there is a great burden that rests on the instructor, or the person who is helping the learning, to constantly build up the conceptual ideas that the instructor wants to have embedded in the experience. And then the challenge is to help build up the structural links between that idea and the experience, so that when the experience is debriefed, we are able to help students gain a richer understanding of a structural dimension of the experience and thereby help them develop broader and more complex mental models that they can use to make sense of situations and guide their efforts to resolve problems. That's really how the whole thing works out.

* *Special thanks to Dareth McKenna, who created an initial transcription of this conversation.*

The Importance of Being on Time for the Bus and the Threefold Nature of Tears

Carole Southwood, Niagara Frontier Center

Everybody said that Sister Gonzaga looked like a turkey. Her real name, Martha Morgan Buglehorn, became revealed yesterday in the boldfaced heading of her obituary. It lent some retroactive personhood to what now seems her benign existence.

Everybody also always said that even though she looked like a turkey, at least she knew enough to use her hanky instead of her fingers to pick her nose, unlike some people, we would say, looking askance and making reference in his presence to Anthony Fly. Anthony Fly never got the hint though, because his practice of picking his nose, at least by comparison to that of Sister Gonzaga, was apparently an unconscious one. I will never forget Anthony Fly nor Sister Gonzaga, for they were both instrumental in my learning the importance of being on time for the bus and the threefold nature of tears.

The source of the learning was English. Gonzaga, as we called her for short, was about to review how to diagram a simple sentence and asked for a volunteer to write one on the board. Nobody offered so she called on Anthony Fly. “You there, Anthony. You come on up here and write a simple sentence on the board for us,” she said.

Anthony Fly went to the blackboard and wrote the sentence, *She drove the car down the street*. He turned to go back to his desk, but Gonzaga stopped him. “Not so fast, Anthony! Get back here,” she said. “What did Anthony forget to do, boys and girls?”

He forgot to put a capital letter at the beginning and a period at the end. “No capital, no period, no capital and no period,” we were all saying. Back at the blackboard, Anthony put a period at the end of the sentence and replaced the small first letter with a capital S. He tried to go back to his desk again but again Gonzaga stopped him. “Whoa,” she said, as if she were speaking to a moving horse, “not so

fast!” Anthony looked bored and disgusted. As usual, a portion of his shirt was sticking out of his pants in the back.

Gonzaga wondered aloud if before going on he couldn’t try to make the sentence, good as it was already, more interesting and colorful. Anthony stood blankly looking at the board and shifted the weight of his body from foot to foot. The nun, touching her chin with her index finger and rolling her eyes around, wondered aloud what would happen if Anthony changed the personal pronoun she to a proper name. She asked the question as if she could not, in her wildest dreams, even begin to imagine what would happen.

Anthony picked up the eraser, erased the personal pronoun, she, put the eraser down, picked up a piece of chalk, and wrote *Sister Gonzaga* at the beginning of the sentence. Everybody laughed, including Gonzaga, who laughed partly from the embarrassment of having become the subject of the sentence, but mostly from the delight of having gotten a little creativity out of Anthony Fly, as well as, I suppose, the certainty of everybody else’s attention.

I also laughed, but not so hard that I cried. At least not yet I didn’t.

Anthony got all the way back to his desk, but Gonzaga called him back again. She wanted to know if he didn’t think the sentence would be even more interesting if the car *Sister Gonzaga* drove down the street – as though the subject of the sentence were in reference to some generic Sister Gonzaga and not she – had an adjective preceding it.

Right then, I saw Anthony put his right hand between his legs. He squeezed himself, then brought his hand to his head and scratched. Oh no, I said to myself, don’t tell me he has to go to the bathroom too. All along I was watching and waiting for Anthony to pick his nose – a little guessing

game I played with myself, how long it would take before Anthony picked his nose: to the count of 10? To the count of 20? And then he went and grabbed himself and scratched his head instead. I knew this meant that Anthony had to go to the lavatory, and I had to go myself, and the thing of it was that two people in succession were not allowed to be excused. It was only the power of suggestion for the second person, once a first person asked, and before you knew it everybody would have to go is what Gonzaga explained to us the first day of school.

After she repeated aloud the sentence *Sister Gonzaga drove the car down the street*, Gonzaga asked Anthony again what color that car was, and again, if an adjective preceding the noun *car* wouldn’t help to make the sentence a more lively one. Anthony must have wanted to get it over with and so he said that the car was a red and black Chevy and that the name of the street was Oak Street. I felt anxious and uncomfortable, waiting for an opening or at least the nerve to ask to go to the bathroom before he did.

Gonzaga was pleased with Anthony’s answer to her question. “Wonderful Anthony!” she exclaimed, in almost a whisper, and made the adjustments on the board while this time Anthony stood where he was. I watched as he confirmed my suspicions about his having to go to the lavatory, for he was making vigorous back and forth movements with his knees. Go on, I coaxed myself, ask her now, but I couldn’t get myself to do it because I felt embarrassed to raise my hand and ask a question irrelevant to the lesson, especially when it had to do with something so personal as going to the bathroom.

Gonzaga finished making the adjustments, so that now the sentence was this: *Sister Gonzaga drove the red and black Chevy down Oak Street*. She asked if everybody

could see how the person driving the car was now a real person, the car a real car, the street a real street. I don't think anybody could see that, but okay, the nun was beside herself with pride in her English lesson and with Anthony Fly. When she told him he could return to his desk, that is when he asked if he could go to the lavatory. "Are you sure you have to go? Are you telling the truth?" All she had to do was notice the way he was rubbing his knees together to see that yes, he really **did** have to go. In any case, there went my chance to ask if I could, and I'm the one who had to go first. I had to go to the bathroom before class even.

It occurred to me to take my chances and ask permission anyway, even though he asked first, but on second thought, I said to myself, no. I would have been too embarrassed if Sister Gonzaga accused me of lying, or even worse, of imagining I had to go because of Anthony Fly having to go first. It would have been humiliating to have had my need subordinated to the need of a person who picked his nose and didn't know enough to tuck his shirt all the way in. And besides, I reasoned, I only have to go number one. So it wasn't as if I had a stomachache or anything like that, so I talked myself out of asking and I resigned myself to holding it. The day wasn't good from the start though, and it was about to get even worse.

That morning, I had almost missed the bus because, at home, a whole can of thawed grape juice concentrate spilled on the floor. While I was helping my mother clean it up, the gauze patch on my arm became stained and she said to hurry up and go put on a new one and that she would finish cleaning up the juice herself. The purpose of the gauze patch was to cover the blister of a burn I had acquired from the bottom of a scorching pan several evenings earlier while I was drying the dishes. My mother had made some hard-boiled eggs, and after they were finished cooking, she inadvertently, without running cold water over the hot pan, put it into the dish rack from which I was taking the washed items to dry. The burn fostered the only blister of its size I had ever encountered.

Putting on a new gauze patch that morning entailed my cutting two strips of adhesive tape, setting them to dangle off the edge

of the bathroom sink, cutting some gauze, folding it into a square, laying it over the unguentine on my blister, and securing it with the strips of tape. My mother would have been helping me, but of course she was cleaning up the grape juice. If neither of those events were taking place, she wiping up the floor and I attending to my burn, I would have been spending this time, as usual, leisurely waiting for the bus before suddenly remembering at the last minute that, oh my God, I needed to bring a bobby pin to school!

It was always the same story, my almost forgetting the bobby pin, because I only needed it once a month for First Friday Mass and so I didn't have much of an opportunity to develop the habit of remembering it. Sometimes the bus would be out in front of the house, yellow and large, intimidatingly full, faces looking out the windows, the bus driver blowing the horn. Suddenly remembering the bobby pin, I would be running into the bathroom getting one while my mother, in her bathrobe, would be holding open the front door as a signal to the bus driver to wait a minute, that any second I would be running out, and soon enough I was. It was embarrassing but I always had my bobby pin.

As it turned out on this particular morning though, the bus had come while I was trying to tape the gauze over my blister and I forgot about the bobby pin altogether, and in addition to that, I was unsuccessful at covering my blister because I had to use my left hand and I am right handed and the blister was on my right arm down close to my wrist and the gauze patch kept falling off.

The purpose of the bobby pin was to keep fastened to the top of my head the little round, white, lace doily which was provided by the school for all the girls to wear to First Friday Mass, and which, without the bobby pin, was liable to sacrilegiously slip off our heads in church while we were bowing during the consecration, or possibly float off while we were genuflecting. The school provided the doily, but it was our responsibility to remember to bring our own bobby pin.

On this particular day, because of the morning commotion with the grape juice, I

didn't realize I forgot the bobby pin until it was time to fasten the doily to my hair just before Mass. Luckily, a seventh grader, Kay Irene Delzoppo, was able to lend me a large hatpin with a pearl at the end of it. Kay Irene said she stole it without permission from her mother's dresser tray in order to play some kind of trick on Lydia O'Sullivan and that I had to promise to give it back or she'd be in big trouble. I promised. I told her I would give it back right after Mass and when the Mass was over, right before English was when I realized I had to go to the lavatory, but I didn't because I was busy looking for Kay Irene. I couldn't find her, so, for safekeeping, I pinned the hatpin into the top right-hand side of my jumper, and now here I was sitting in English class wearing the hatpin with the point side up and the pearl side down.

Even though Gonzaga liked Anthony Fly's sentence *Sister Gonzaga drove the red and black Chevrolet down Oak Street*, she explained that for the purposes of diagramming, she was going to make the sentence more simple, so she changed it, just for the time being, to *Sister drove the car down the street*, writing the new sentence on the board in addition to the complicated colorful one, not in place of it, and then alongside it she drew a fairly long, horizontal line.

She called on Judy Spula for the subject of the sentence, and Judy Spula said "Sister Gonzaga" and Gonzaga said "good" and wrote *Sister Gonzaga* on the far left-hand side of the horizontal line.

Next Gonzaga drew a vertical line just to the right of, and right alongside Sister, down through the horizontal line, so that a portion of the vertical line extended above the horizontal line and a portion extended below it.

Now Gonzaga called on Gary Palumbo for the predicate of the sentence, and Gary said "drove," and Sister said "good" and wrote *drove* on the horizontal line alongside the vertical line, which now separated *Sister Gonzaga*, the subject, from *drove*, the predicate.

Next Gonzaga drew another vertical line, this one just to the right of *drove*, but one which only met the horizontal line perpendicularly and did not extend below

it. This vertical line did not extend as high above the horizontal line as the first vertical line did. It was a little shorter.

Gonzaga called on David Perner for the direct object and David Perner said “car” and Sister said “good” and wrote *car* on the horizontal line just to the right of the shorter vertical line. There was now no more room on the horizontal line for words.

I stared at the words on the line and I imagined the line to be the street itself that car was driving down and at the same time forever parked on as it sat there, as the direct object, at the end of it. I began to envision little oak trees growing out of the line, instead of words, with the greenest of leaves and a sky of blue above. Little colorful flowers began sprouting up before the imaginary houses, which bordered the line on either side of the street it had become.

In the meantime, Gonzaga drew another conglomeration of lines and angles to contain the fateful prepositional phrase, *down the street*. “Okay,” she said, and she looked at Patty Cookfair. “What part of speech is *down*, Patricia,” she said, and Patty said it was the preposition, and Gonzaga said “that’s right” while she wrote *down* on the slanted line underneath the predicate *drove*.

Gonzaga pulled a big round watch on a chain out from underneath her apron and looked at it. She was running out of time because English was short that day, the First Friday Mass preceding it. For the sake of review, she still wanted to cover the placement of the object of the proposition *street* on the diagram, as well as the articles, the two *the*’s, in the simpler of the simple sentences, and also the placement in the diagram of the adjectives *red* and *black* and *oak* in the lively and more colorful sentence of Anthony’s, all of which may or may not have explained why Gonzaga, perhaps in a little too much of a hurry, put me into the unfortunate predicament, the source of the lesson of the importance of being on time for the bus.

Gonzaga wanted to know the function of the word *street* in the sentence *Sister drove the car down the street*. As fate would have it, she was going to call on me for the answer. Of course, I would not have been

there for her to call on if I had gone to the lavatory, if only I had had the nerve to speak up before Anthony Fly beat me to it. “And street,” she said, looking around the room. “*Street* is the object of the prepo ... ?”

And with that she pointed to *me*. How stupid! Object of the prepo! I knew that the answer was *zishion*, but I felt foolish and embarrassed to answer a question with only two syllables of a four-syllable word, no matter how correct the answer was. And anyway Patty Cookfair already identified the word as the preposition, so what was the point of creating a whole new question with half of the answer built into it! I sat in silence looking blankly at Gonzaga, more incredulous that she was serious about the question than I was embarrassed to answer.

“Wake up, Missy,” she said. “Street is the object of the prepo ... ?”

“... Zishion,” I heard myself say, and just as I said it, I let out a loud burst of laughter.

To me, the absurdity seemed obvious, and I expected everybody else to let out a loud burst of laughter right along with me, including Gonzaga, otherwise I would not have been so uninhibited in my outburst.

Oh but I was gravely mistaken. I seemed to be the only one who saw anything at all funny in my having to say *zishion*, and I felt embarrassed and humiliated, my face becoming hot and, I imagined, red. I somehow believed, though, that if I kept on laughing silently, shaking up and down, I might possibly lend validity to the fact that I was doing so, and possibly somebody in the class, or even Gonzaga, would have retroactive recognition of how funny it was, and join in with me, but nobody did, and so the more I silently laughed alone the more embarrassed I became, and the more embarrassed I became the more I shook up and down laughing to lend validity to the fact that I was doing so.

I soon felt alienated from the human race during those moments, and I laughed so hard I was crying. Tears flowed from my eyes, burning tears, and I found it impossible to continue to pay any attention in English. Now I was embarrassed, not only because I answered a question with only two syllables of a four-syllable word, and not only because I burst out laughing all by myself, but also because, for no apparent

reason, the tears flowed from my eyes uncontrollably no matter how hard I tried to stop them by tightening up my throat. In fact, the tears seemed to be stifling my ability to swallow at all, and since nobody seemed to be paying any attention to me, the fact of which at the time I was totally unaware, my embarrassment, now that I think of it, was all the more foolish because it was embarrassment in the presence of merely me.

The tears continued to flow from my eyes, and I still tried to swallow to stifle them, and I feigned laughter while I cried, in the event that anybody who might be watching me would believe that I was involved in a legitimate private joke, and possibly even respect me for having an esoteric sense of humor. As I look back on the situation, I see that nobody could really have been watching me because I sat all the way in the back of the classroom in the corner, and the two people who normally sat adjacent to me on the left were absent that day.

I reached an intensity of embarrassment where I employed an involuntary device of mine, which I often employed when I felt embarrassment getting the best of me at school. It entailed my bringing my right arm around the front of my face, my chin wedged in the inside of the bend of my elbow, and clasping the back of my neck with my right hand and squeezing as hard as I could. I did this now, and as I brought my arm back down again, I accidentally slid it across the point of the stolen hatpin in the top of my jumper, breaking the uncovered blister of my burn. Water came out of it, mixed with a little bit of blood, because the hatpin point not only punctured the blister but entered the mushy flesh part underneath as my arm moved along the point of the hatpin. With involuntary urgency, I covered the broken blister with the palm of my left hand and pressed on it as hard as I could and clenched my teeth.

I could hear that Gonzaga was now saying something about Monday and homework and compound subjects and compound predicates, but I did not pay attention to the assignment. The pain in my arm didn’t distress me as much as the worry and anticipation of the possible consequences of a hatpin point going into the blister of a burn. What if I would have to go to the

hospital now, I wondered, the palm of my left hand pressed hard against my wound. What if I would have to be put to sleep? What if I had to go to the Cleveland Clinic? How would I get there? My father's car was in the garage for repair. Was there coverage, I wondered, as I had heard the term used with regards to my grandmother's gall bladder operation, for something which one carelessly inflicts upon oneself, with a stolen hatpin? I was feeling guilty for what I had done, and ashamed. What if I would have to submit the hatpin in order for the broken blister to be treated, I wondered, the way people have to submit bottles of pills in order for children, who might accidentally swallow too many of them, to be treated? Kay Irene Delzoppo might get in trouble on account of it, so there was that to consider, and not only that, how would I ever explain to anybody how this accident occurred? Did other people, I wondered, have special body movements they employed involuntarily when overwhelmed with embarrassment? How would I explain the source of my affliction? And what if I had to fill all of this information in on a form? How would I spell the word *zishion*? I was probably underage, I reasoned, being only 10, and my mother would fill in the information on the form.

But even so, *how would I explain it to my mother!*

I dreaded the inevitability that this misfortune could never be explained. Maybe I should just keep quiet about it, I decided, keep the whole thing to myself, bear with the pain, and run away and die in secret of gangrene. This would eliminate all the possible consequences of my carelessness that occurred to me second by tormenting second. Dying would be easier.

A vision passed through my mind of my parents and my grandparents crying at my

funeral. I couldn't help but think that if I planned out my mornings better and had been on time for the bus, this would never have happened. No bobby pin could have ever done damage like this, I thought. And there it was, the importance of being on time for the bus, an importance proving to be, after all, a matter of life and death.

And yet, what about the importance of wiping up a mess on the kitchen floor? What about that? What about the importance of lending a helping hand? Actually, now that I think about it, no sooner had I learned the importance of being on time for the bus than it became subordinate to a different importance, kindness and Christian charity. Soon though, I noticed that the pain of my burn had subsided somewhat and Gonzaga was dismissing the class.

While I rode home on the bus reflecting upon the idea that school fosters calamities, both physically and emotionally, a speck of something in one of my eyes made it tear. I discovered the foreign object to be an eyelash. As I held on to my top eyelashes, moving my eyelid up and down, it occurred to me that the nature of the tears that had been in my eyes earlier was threefold. They were all the same set of tears, but they had changed from tears of laughter, to tears of embarrassment, to tears of physical pain. I wondered if the chemical composition of the tears was threefold as well as the emotional nature, and if there were instruments to determine this. I didn't include the tears from the eyelash in my list, because these, I thought, did not have their nature inside me. Those tears, I concluded, as the ones from peeling onions, didn't matter because their origin was external. I now do see that since it was my own eyelash causing my eyes to tear on the bus, it was somewhat inaccurate to put those tears into the same category

with the tears from peeling onions, because onions, unlike detached eyelashes, were not connected to a person in the first place.

Contemplating the nature of tears served only momentarily though in distracting me from the unpleasant experience of my day. I began to feel the embarrassment all over again, and pangs of apprehension about the consequences of my broken blister grew once more. I felt a lot of dread about having to go back to school again on Monday. What would befall me next?

For the remainder of the ride home, I made fervent promises to myself to always put my bobby pin into my pocket the Thursday night before First Friday. I planned to make a sign as soon as I got home and tape it to my mirror. I promised myself to never again attempt to drink juice in the morning on a school day. I promised always to be alert, to never again answer a question with only two syllables of a four-syllable word. Still though, as I rode home, I was trying very hard to convince myself that not having repeated *prepo* after Gonzaga already said it was the right thing to have done. Surely, anybody in my place would have done the same.

As I stood up to get off the bus the pain of my broken blister had entirely subsided, but I became aware that sometime during the course of the afternoon I had peed my pants, and feelings of embarrassment rose up in me all over again.

Although it happened over 40 years ago, I remember the day was cool and cloudy, and in that wet underwear, the walk home from the bus stop seemed like a long one. Far away inside me the voice of my wiser self whispered, "Let it go. Let a silly thing go."

Maybe I did.

I don't think so.

The Role of Experience in Adult Learning: Positive or Negative?

Nancy Gadbow, Genesee Valley Center

It ain't what you don't know that gets you in trouble, it's what you know for sure that just ain't so.

– Mark Twain

Experience vs. Learning

Through the process of developing a learning portfolio, we, at Empire State College, have always valued and recognized that adult students' past experience might include valuable college-level learning. We also are aware of other experiences and situations that demonstrate growth and continued learning for one individual, but not for another. An example is the teacher who teaches a class the same way year after year, as opposed to one who reflects, learns and grows, so that each day and each year is a new and vital learning experience both for the teacher and the learners. The focus of this essay is primarily on learning or experiences that have not resulted in positive, accurate and growth-enhancing outcomes, but rather in learning that is growth-inhibiting. The essay also includes a discussion of effective strategies for helping these adult learners move toward openness to new learning and critical thinking.

According to Merriam et al. (1996), "life experience is the basis for much of the learning that takes place in adulthood" (p. 1). The authors note that learning is often described as the process of making meaning out of life experiences. Learning, whether gained in a formal higher education setting or informally learned through life experiences, can result "in changes in behavior, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs" (p. 1). Indeed, experience-based learning and the possible value of understanding one's experience as a foundation for new learning has long been an important topic for adult educators (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993). No doubt, much of the adult education literature has focused on positive growth as an outcome of learning, and has

built on humanistic psychology's emphasis on life experiences and personal growth through learning. These concepts have been integrated in the adult learning literature, particularly the focus on andragogy (Knowles, 1980), as well as the concept of "perspective transformation" reflected in the writings of Daloz (1986), Brookfield (1987) and Mezirow (1991).

However, not all learning results in positive or accurate information or perceptions. As Merriam et al. (1996) put it, "The adult learning and education literature is overwhelmingly skewed toward the view that learning is a healthy endeavor leading to positive, growth-enhancing outcomes. There is virtually no discussion about the learning process that results in regressive, growth-inhibiting outcomes" (p. 3).

Barriers to Learning

There are different barriers or deterrents to learning that many adults face, particularly when they decide to begin or return to higher education to earn a degree. Such barriers include lack of time, lack of money, multiple responsibilities, health problems, lack of past successes as a learner, financial aid guidelines and restrictions, undiagnosed learning disabilities, physical disabilities and lack of support from family and friends. These barriers are very real and often impact an adult student's progress in a degree program. Some students have multiple barriers or factors that influence how they learn. Learners with special needs include students with a range of physical and learning disabilities and the possible need for special approaches and new technologies to support their learning (Gadbow, 2002; Gadbow and Du Bois, 1998). All learners have a combination of unique characteristics and needs that call for appropriate strategies to help them learn effectively. But as significant as these barriers certainly are, they do not necessarily lead to learning that is false or limiting.



Nancy Gadbow

In addition to these barriers for adult learners going through a significant learning experience, this period as an adult student may have other implications for their personal lives. Studying as an adult can present problems and separate the adult from others, resulting sometimes in the loss of friendships or even the break-up of marriages. I remember the comment of one of the persons I interviewed as part of my research for my dissertation. She was a woman in her 50s who had returned to college after many years to complete a bachelor's degree. She described that college had "made a chasm between her and her friends" (Gadbow, 1985). Although she was learning and growing in her studies, her friends felt that she no longer had time for them (and, perhaps, during this time, she actually didn't)!

But once again, there is a difference between our awareness of such personal ramifications of adult students pursuing a college degree and any learning that is "growth inhibiting." That is, none of these barriers or deterrents to learning and none of these personal effects on a student's life may be related necessarily to a person

having a limited view of a particular issue, based on his or her own experience and how it has been interpreted.

Learning and Negative Outcomes

Experiences for some individuals do result in outcomes that are “growth-inhibiting” (Merriam, et al., 1996). “I know! I’ve been there!” It is quite likely that as faculty members, especially as mentors at Empire State College, we have encountered such students. Their views on a specific topic are restricted to their own particular experiences and they are not open to new learning about the subject. Such persons may rely on preconceived ideas, they may have strong biases, be closed-minded or outright prejudiced. In myriad ways, they have “jumped to conclusions” and are not willing to seek out new information or imagine alternative points of view.

According to Berg (1993), experience is the “mother of convention” (p. 25). She notes that past experiences can anchor individuals in the past, particularly when they assume that because something happened previously, it will continue to happen in the same way in the future. Such individuals tend to over-generalize from past negative experiences (or even positive ones), don’t like to discuss their mistakes or failures, don’t accept responsibility for their actions or the results, and believe that what is possible in the future is determined by what has happened in the past. An experience that a student has had (or certainly substantial involvement in experiences over a period of time) may have built a particularly strong point of view regarding a specific topic, or even an entire mindset. In extreme cases, such narrow perspectives may be very restrictive – even dangerous.

In exploring materials for this topic, I came to the realization that I may sometimes be guilty of having made up my mind about a person or situation. That is, I may not always be reflecting the “openness” and critical thinking that I claim or would like to encourage in our students. Recognizing my own limitations may help me be able to develop better strategies to help students grow and develop in positive ways.

... I wondered how I could have done a better job of developing and maintaining a respectful relationship with the student and to his ideas and feelings, even while making it clear that I had a different point of view on the topic.

Strategies and Approaches to Help Adult Learners Re-examine their Views and Beliefs

As mentors, we are eager to consider ways to help a student move from “I know the truth about X” to be able to ask “What is known about X?” “Where can I find good sources to explore this topic?” “What new questions do I have?” We want to promote a willingness to investigate, inquire, question and re-examine previously held belief systems. This process generally does not happen quickly, but over time.

One of the important aspects of our work as mentors is the development of a relationship with the student. We can develop and seek to maintain a respectful relationship with the student in person, by phone, by e-mail and in communication within an online course. In considering this role, I reflected on a recent experience with a student. Henry (pseudonym) is a tall young man with both physical problems and some strong personal opinions. In a meeting with him not long ago (I can’t remember how this topic came up), he began a tirade on the issue of gun control. He is strongly in support of freedom to own and use various types of guns. He is very vocal and strongly opposed to any laws or restrictions on firearms. I began to bristle when he started a harangue on this topic. I offered counter-arguments. Afterwards, I thought about this experience and how I might have handled the situation differently.

For example, what if I had suggested that he explore scholarly sources that presented arguments and information related to gun use, crimes and injuries related to guns? How would I do that in such a way that he might have been willing to enter into such research in a truly enquiring way? In reflecting on this experience, I wondered how I could have done a better job of developing and maintaining a respectful relationship with the student and to his ideas and feelings, even while making it clear that I had a different point of view on the topic. The important question then becomes, How can one maintain the positive relationship with the student in spite of differences in perspective?

When we do work at building and maintaining the mentor/student relationship, we then can move to help promote varied approaches that lead to critical thinking. Ed Warzala, fellow unit coordinator and colleague at the Genesee Valley Center, brought to our attention a little blue book, *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools* (Paul and Elder, 2004). Critical thinking is the key to helping our students move to being willing to question, explore and examine previously held beliefs. This small booklet contains some valuable strategies to help students understand and use critical thinking. It provides a brief and clear resource to guide learning activities that might open up critical thinking. Thus, learning activities using this guide to critical thinking can be inserted in learning contracts (regardless of topic) for which a student might enroll early in his or her program at Empire State College.

Another valuable source for helping students build their critical-thinking skills is a book by an Empire State College colleague, Michael Andolina, *Critical Thinking for Working Students* (2001). It offers exercises and case studies to help students examine their perspectives and develop critical-thinking skills. Like the Paul and Elder text, it could be used to guide critical thinking activities related to a number of different subjects. In science studies, in which I regularly mentor, I encourage students to select a topic to study for a final research paper and ask: “What is known about X?” They are encouraged to seek appropriate

sources to examine the topic and compare and contrast the evidence they find.

The mentor can help guide the student in this process of becoming a more critical thinker and moving along in the process of transformation by the following:

- articulating assumptions
- engaging in critical self-reflection
- acknowledging and becoming open to alternative viewpoints
- being encouraged to enter into discourse on a topic
- revisiting assumptions and perspectives
- acting on revisions, behaving, talking in a way that is congruent with transformational assumptions or perspectives (Cranton, 2002).

Cranton (2002) notes that “it is easier and safer to maintain habits of mind than to change. It may take a significant or dramatic event to lead us to question assumptions or beliefs” (p. 65). However, she also writes about gradual incremental processes that may lead to a change of perspective. In any event, it is not a simple process and there are no simple explanations for why such change occurs or does not. She describes different types of knowledge. Of particular relevance is “emancipatory knowledge,” “the self-awareness that frees us from constraints, is a product of critical reflection and crucial self-reflection” (p. 64):

An individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world (Cranton, 2002, p. 64).

When such change occurs, the student is now willing to examine, explore and discover new information, not limited to his or her personal or group beliefs or past experience. The student is becoming more aware of and open to asking challenging and demanding questions about a topic.

So too, the mentor/student relationship can be a positive one that fosters learning and development rather than just the reproduction of a hierarchical situation of professor as an authority figure and student as he or she who knows nothing. In addition, Baumgartner (2001), for example, reminds us that the process of transformational learning involves emotions – often strong ones. New ideas may threaten a student’s world view, and we should be aware of the possible psychological implications of such change and be prepared to offer some strategies to help students deal with their emotions during this process.

Another source that I have used in the study of organizational behavior that has helped students examine different perspectives is a book by Bolman and Deal (1997), *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*. The book focuses on examining situations in organizations from various perspectives. Such examples of multiple-perspective-taking can be applied to many different situations (at home, at work, in the community) and can help our students consider how to reframe their thinking to see things from several different viewpoints.

Developing what we imagine to be an “open mind” is not easy for anyone to do. We are all subject to the influences of our particular life experiences and to the power of ideas, institutions and social expectations over our responses to and understanding of just about anything and everything. However, if we develop and maintain open relationships with our students while we work together to develop and refine our critical-thinking skills, we will find that we will continue to learn and grow along with our students. The goal of our efforts as mentors is “The fundamental growth of the mind, transformational learning, qualitative changes in how the student knows, not just what the student knows” (Kegan, p. 273). As we help our students become more critical thinkers, we also seek to continue to grow and be open to new learning and perspectives for ourselves.

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The iceberg metaphor, often used to describe the amount of hidden learning all of us possess and about which we are unaware, effectively depicts our challenge in discovering what lies beneath the surface. We continue to struggle to find ways of uncovering it, as individuals, organizations, communities and countries. Because classroom learning is still seen as the only learning that really counts, individuals with uncredentialed knowledge, skills and abilities face huge attitudinal, structural and financial barriers. And while PLAR [Recognition of Prior Learning] continues to be about equity, access and social inclusion, it may be economics and our current skills shortage that provide the catalyst to jettison PLAR into the mainstream of Canadian life.

– Bonnie Kennedy, “Recognition of Prior Learning in Canada: Thoughts for Today – Hopes for Tomorrow” *CAEL Forum and News*, fall 2006

Rock, Snow, Trees and a Cow

Photography by Lee Herman, Central New York Center



Rail Bridge, Owasco Inlet



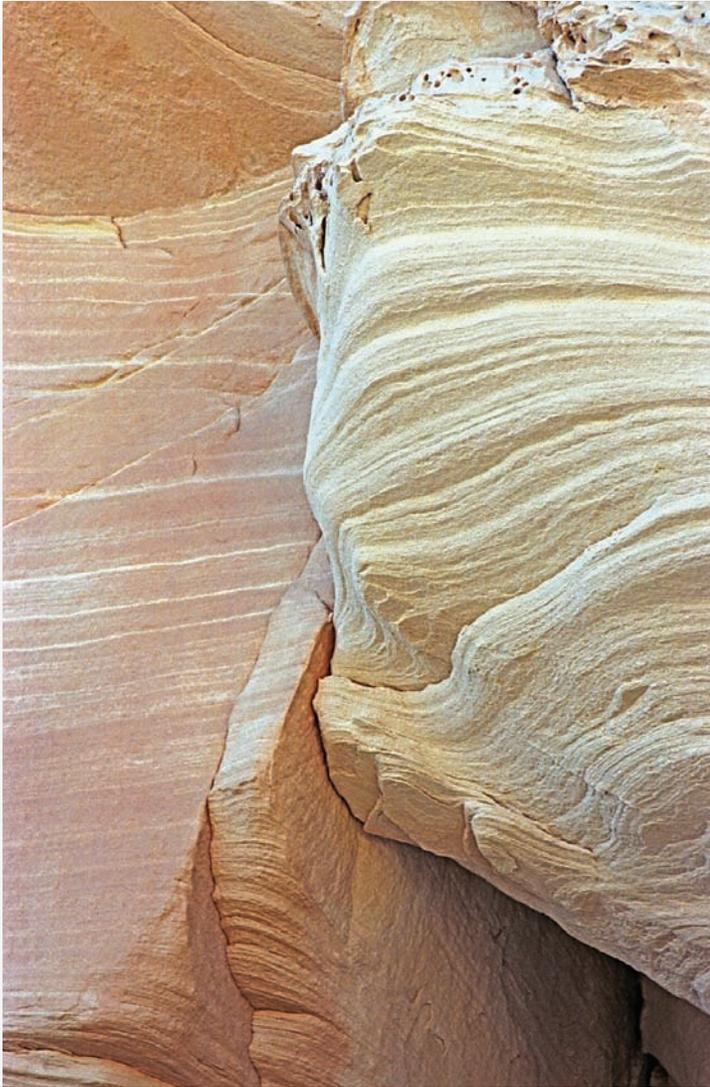
Snow Slide, Lake Ontario



Snow Flow, Lake Ontario



Milkweed Against Snow



Layers and Flow Above Snow Canyon, Utah



Rock Skin 10, Utah



Rock Skin 1, Utah



A Cow in the Woods



Leaf and Gravel, West Hill Road

Found Things Ten Out of Thirty

Ernest Palola and Paul Bradley, Empire State College Office of Research and Evaluation

In May 1973, Empire State College's Office of Research and Evaluation published a 60-page report, "Ten Out of Thirty: Studies of the First Graduates of Empire State College." Students had begun to study at the college in the fall of 1971. As the report noted, "the college spent much of its first year trying to develop rational academic and procedural policies. However, because students were already enrolled, the pace was hectic for all." In order to take stock of its academic progress, Palola and Bradley asked our "first graduates" two basic questions: "Who are the people who are trying, somewhat against the current, to implement this vitally needed educational alternative?" and "Who are the students who seek out such a place and what makes them want to become embroiled in a new institution?" They worked with a sample of 10 students from the three original regional learning centers (Albany, Manhattan and Rochester), who were among the 30 who graduated in the fall of 1972. Each student was involved in "lengthy, tape-recorded interviews about their experiences with Empire State College," materials that became the basis for this report.

What follows are two of the interviews contained in the Palola/Bradley report, one of "Anita" and the other of "Mike." Thanks, as always, to Richard Bonnabeau, director for academic programming in the Center for International Programs and Empire State College historian, whose archival work and whose care for our past is crucial to unearthing these "found things."

ANITA

Anita is a highly independent and motivated person, extremely active in community projects and committees. Her experience at Empire State College was an extension of these activities. One can see clearly her initiative when reading about her project in the family court.

Anita has long been active in many types of community action programs. Thus, her six months' study in this area at Empire State College merely culminated 15 years of interest and involvement. A tally sheet in her portfolio is impressive: three years of PTA leadership, two years of working in a community center, one year working in an inner-city daycare center, one year teaching, one year developing a new high school report card system and working with an elementary school reading group, four years directing a YWCA literature class, two years in a preschool mothers' group, and one year developing a community participation program. In addition, Anita attended two local institutions over the years, a community college and a university, and completed a total of 46 semester hours. She is, as indicated on the Omnibus Personality Inventory, an independent person with little fear of attempting new things and great concern for others.

The community activities engaged in by Anita are those of someone from a well to do family but Anita also has experienced another side of things. She was a grade 10 dropout. This seems to affect her perspective on many things. Anita describes her Empire State College orientation session as:

... A room full of people just like me – people chomping at the bit. They needed a real piece of paper. The average age was about 35. Those with no college experience were quite frustrated and confused. Such people tend to be quiet and ready to take

orders from the person in front of the room. I think I know how they feel, inferior. I only felt good about the orientation myself because I already knew [my mentor] pretty well.

At the orientation workshop Anita filled out the Student Information Form. On this, she described herself as generally an average person in academic ability, ambitions and political beliefs. Where she differs is the strength of her feelings on educational issues. Anita agrees strongly that "college grades should be abolished," that "open admission should be adopted by all publicly supported colleges," and that "colleges would be improved if organized sports were de-emphasized." She also disagrees strongly that "college officials have the right to regulate student behavior off campus," that "student publications should be cleared by college officials," and that "college officials have the right to ban persons with extreme views from speaking on campus." The firmness of these responses is perhaps partially explained by Anita's special interest in programs for young children which "... build on the natural interests and skills of the child." Many of her previous experiences have been with such programs and, as her mentor notes:

Anita tends to be wholly reliant upon self-determination as the most humanistic process for learning ... this view also characterized her criticism of the Great Books discussions: when open and unpremeditated, it is likely to be good. If it is structured by the leader, even for a set of questions which are exploratory, it is unsuccessful.

Anita's program of study at Empire State College was built upon her interest in children and evolved into law and social action. Her first contract, begun at her initiative two months before the formal opening of her regional learning center, related readings in Piaget, Bruner and

Whitehead to her own observations of children. Performance on this one month contract convinced the mentor that Anita was ready to embark on a study of family courts. Characteristically, Anita had already started. Her mentor notes:

She was in the Church Women's League which had begun a court-watching exercise aimed at observation and perhaps comment. But Anita, when she goes into something, goes in all the way.

Anita explains:

I was interested in the family courts and decided to find out how families and children get caught up in them. I observed and interviewed the court staff, people at related community agencies, and people in the community with past involvement in court actions.

Out of this came a great deal of data, a record of feelings and attitudes of several hundred people. Anita used the interview data to write a report which she submitted for evaluation to several people: an attorney, a jail minister, a judge, a representative of the local bail fund and a representative of the local ecumenical court-watchers group. All assessed the report favorably as did the mentor. The report was then published and distributed into the community.

Looking back at this contract, Anita recalls:

... working 12 to 14 hours a day but that was because I was so enthusiastic about what I was doing. I spent five hours interviewing on weekdays. This was tricky because no one was allowed in the court without special permission from the principals. Some gave it freely. However, I learned much of what I learned in the corridors. The interviews then had to be written up. Reading and research took the rest of the time.

She also had some evaluative comments: "I found that most social workers, attorneys and judges are not thinking philosophically about what they're doing. They also don't know much about what kinds of things people went through before getting to them. This can make them insensitive to the needs of the people."

Anita's final three month contract included writing the final draft of her family court study and also allowed her to explore community and social agency areas for future research. The mentor notes in his evaluation that:

The student made significant adjustments to the unpredictable data which developed in her examination of other research possibilities similar to the family court project ... The student's breadth of information and experience now enables her to move easily and competently into new areas of investigation.

Assessment of prior learning proved in some ways a sour experience for Anita. She had responded well to the original Empire State College statements about credits for life's experiences.

I'd saved everything. I made a chart of the organizations and agencies that I'd been in. I then invented a weight scale: one full day a week was worth one-fourth of an academic year. Fortunately, I didn't have to reach too hard. For example, I did not have to ask for credit for being a Girl Scout leader because I'd been a PTA president where I really learned. Eight hours a day on that. I found that developing the portfolio was fun and worthwhile. I gathered up all the notebooks and got them organized.

However, by the time she had completed her requirements for advanced standing, the college had solidified its thinking into the notion that a portfolio should demonstrate "prior learning" and not "experience." Thus, the Assessment Committee at Anita's center asked her to write an essay on what she had learned from the many experiences. Anita remembers:

I got miffed. They had reviewed the portfolio without me and asked me to write a paper. They knew my work anyhow and I'd already spent three weeks getting the stuff together so I appealed the decision. I went to the committee and it was like being on the operating table but they gave in. I guess the committee was especially careful because they wanted the Empire State College degree to mean something but

they shouldn't have changed the rules in the middle of the game.

The committee gave her 30 months credit for her learning. Despite the strong feelings about what happened with her portfolio, Anita still thinks that granting advanced standing on the basis of a portfolio is a "great idea. I have recently been recommending to people generally that they make lists of what they have done as a way to figure out where to go next."

Anita was independent enough that she came to the learning center "only every two weeks or so" but she thinks that most students need a counselor, "a supportive person who can give a student lots of time. Many students cannot relate to their mentors for a while." This viewpoint came out of a fair number of contacts with other Empire State College students at the first few orientation workshops and at an open picnic held at her house. She feels that "Empire State College students should get together more often and be involved in every part of the college operations, especially assessment of prior learning."

In evaluating her cognitive and affective improvements, Anita rates her growth mainly in the middle and above middle categories in interpersonal competence, awareness, self reliance, self understanding, knowledge, evaluation and comprehension. She sees only one very high area of growth, clarification of purpose.

Anita says that the best part of Empire State College was:

... knowing that SUNY considered this type of education possible and desirable. I am afraid that they may someday ruin the college with too many regulations. The worst experience? Assessment. An example of too many regulations.

Anita is having no trouble selling her degree to anyone. "I would not have been able to get interviews for at least a half dozen jobs if it were a problem."

MIKE

Until Empire State College, Mike has spent years seeking a college where he could pursue a degree without jeopardizing his present job and family responsibilities. His program of studies in labor was definite and well thought out. An informal assessment of prior learning took into account his depth of experience in the labor movement and in labor journalism. Mike proved an excellent fit with Empire State College, achieving his purpose and gaining some further areas of interest that he will continue to pursue.

Mike learned about Empire State College through a newspaper article in winter 1971 which discussed the theories and no-campus aspects of the college. As he clipped the article out and put it in his file "Education," he remembers saying to his wife:

Somebody in higher education has finally brought himself to the level of the working class and recognized the connection between the experience of a lifetime and education.

When Empire State College later located its Coordinating Center in Mike's town, he decided to investigate and "... arrived to see a building full of painters, carpenters, electricians and a few administrators. I felt at home when (the director of admissions) interviewed me while we sat on two large cartons."

"Home" to Mike is a blue-collar world. He married young, and shortly after started work in a factory. He spent the next 18 years on an assembly line. During this time, he became deeply involved in union affairs as financial secretary of the local for nine years, president and bargaining chairman for four years, and delegate to numerous regional, national and international conventions and subcouncils. To prepare for these responsibilities, he took part in several noncredit leadership training sessions at such places as the UAW Education Center in Michigan.

Mike describes his most important personal concerns as: "... number one, to always support my family, and number two, to improve their lot as a family, to make our life better." These somewhat conflicting security and ambition motivations caused Mike first to grab and then relinquish

several opportunities for post secondary education. He was one of the initial students at a new community college near his plant but "... the company wouldn't cooperate. They wouldn't let me come in 15 - 20 minutes late one day a week. They were afraid to set a precedent ..." Later when on the night shift, he convinced another area college to accept him as its first ever part time day student. This went well for two months until his shift changed. The classes went. Next came courses in the evening division of another area institution. By driving for two hours on three nights a week, he completed 8 credit hours. These frustrating experiences made Mike quickly recognize the lack of a fixed class schedule as a key advantage of Empire State College.

Mike describes his orientation workshop, the college's first, as "... chaotic ... confusing for everyone who was there." However, since it was the college's first and because Mike had faith in the college staff, he overlooked much of the confusion and enjoyed most of the sessions:

There were lots of questions: What will this college use for a transcript? How will you evaluate past experiences? How many hours will I carry? I did not ask any questions because I felt if they are committed to what they say in that little phrase 'credit for life's experiences,' if the chancellor recognizes it, if the trustees recognize it, if everyone in higher education recognizes it, and they are really willing to lay it on the line and say 'you can do this - we are willing to go this far if you are willing to apply yourself;' then that is all I had in mind. I didn't want to muddy it up.

This first orientation, lasting two days and nights, was the longest ever held by Empire State College and allowed much informal banter. While Mike drifted quietly through the formal sessions, he did not remain silent all of the time:

A gratifying experience was the interest expressed by my fellow students in me. I probably answered more questions than the mentors in the small group meetings ... lots about labor unions and the labor movement.

While Mike is generally complimentary in describing his orientation, he did criticize the administration of two standardized questionnaires, the Survey of College Achievement and the Omnibus Personality Inventory, as inappropriate for many:

To get students like me, you must realize that the hopes, dreams and aspirations of a lot of people in this industrial age have been put on the shelf. You have to make this as easy a translation as possible. Guys like me are reluctant to participate in a stringent testing program because of the embarrassment that is involved.

Another form that the students filled out during the final session at the orientation workshop was the Student Information Form. Several of Mike's responses on the SIF reveal a low degree of self-confidence in academic areas at this stage in his Empire State College career. Mike listed his highest degree of aspiration as an Associate in Arts. He also rated himself below average in academic ability and originality and in the lowest 10 percent in artistic and mathematical abilities. Furthermore, Mike responded that there was a "very good chance" that he might need extra time to complete his degree requirements and that he might "fail one or more study programs." One interesting variation to low self-confidence responses is Mike's belief that his writing ability is in the "top 10 percent" and that this might well lead him to publish an article while in college.

A second pattern found by analyzing the SIF is Mike's liberalism. He identified himself as a "liberal" and endorsed the following statements: "strongly agree that the Federal Government is not doing enough to control pollution," "strongly agree that the Federal Government is not doing enough to protect consumers from faulty goods and services," "strongly agree that the Federal Government is not doing enough to promote school desegregation," "somewhat disagree that there is too much concern for the rights of criminals in courts" and "strongly disagree that college officials have been too lax in dealing with student protests on campus." Such responses seem on the surface much more typical of an 18-year old son of a college professor than of a 35 year old life long factory worker.

After orientation, Mike and his mentor quickly began developing a program of study. Mike came to Empire State College with the idea of working around a Wayne State “canned” program on labor studies which included components of psychology, sociology, philosophy, collective bargaining, American History, constitutional law, etc. Together with the mentor, Mike compared these areas with his life experiences to determine weak areas. This led to a cohesive program of study centered around the history of labor and the working class. The mentor’s rationale for this program was “... to remove me from narrowness and give me a complete picture of the world wide labor movement.”

Mike’s two contracts (half time) leading to his Associate in Arts with concentration on labor studies are models of consistency with variety. The scope of the first contract on the history of the labor movement is:

... broad, ranging from mid-19th century political/labor tracks through the condition of the early 20th century factory laborers, early labor organizing, surveying the way in which industrialists tried to answer the challenges laid on them by both labor and the productive mode itself and ending with a research project which touched on all of the preceding.

The contract featured extensive readings including Marx, Engels, Eugene Debs, Upton Sinclair, Samuel Gompers; a film titled *The Organizer* starring Marcello Mastroianni; and conference with a tutor who helped to define the topics of the major research paper on “The General Motors Sit Down Strike, 1936 - 37.” Evaluation of the contract was based on a student journal, conferences between the mentor and student, the research paper, and several short papers on such questions as:

How did the *Communist Manifesto* attempt to meet the needs of the working class people in the mid 19th century? How did Marx define the working class? The owner class? Given your own experiences both in the factory and out, how did these definitions relate to you?

Mike’s papers drew much praise from his mentor:

The paper was both literate and resourceful, moving easily between theory and reality, and demonstrating both a fine historical sense and a rather impressive ability to execute a study in comparative sociology.

... Mike wrote an extremely interesting paper relating the ideas of these men to the world in which they lived. Often, throughout the paper, Mike made telling and well substantiated judgments as to how well their ideas and organizations met the demands of the reality. Additionally, as he has done throughout his studies, he has been able to begin relating this early history of the labor movement to his own historical experiences as an organizer within the union.

Mike is one of the best undergraduate students that I have been in contact with.

Mike’s second contract – lasting one month – explored the sociology of work: “those ways in which factory work affects the social existence and perceptions of working class people.” By this time, Mike had decided to continue his studying beyond the AA so the second contract became a feed-in to a larger research project also on the sociology of work which was to be completed after the associate’s degree. The contract involved reading both classical and current sociological literature related to the workers: Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*; Zola, *Germinal*; Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*; etc. It also included a paper which was a proposal for the later project. The mentor’s evaluation was again complimentary:

In addition to reading significant writings and formulating an approach to his forthcoming research. Mike once again demonstrated a good deal of resourcefulness and self-determination in locating people and materials which aided his understanding of the general problem.

Mike was one of the first Empire State College students to request a large amount of advanced standing for primarily informal experiences. The portfolio was exemplary and showed clearly the ways in which the program of studies was tying together his

background and his goals. After examining Mike’s rich experiences as documented in the portfolio, the Assessment Committee made its recommendation. Mike received the maximum allowable advanced standing toward the Associate in Arts degree.

Furthermore, the committee suggested that he reapply for more credit toward a B.A. upon completion of the A.A. Thus, in the end, Mike received a total of 23 months advanced standing, 15 toward the A.A. plus eight more after this plateau. Mike was pleased with the assessment but, again revealing an uninflated opinion of his self-accomplishments, admits that he would “... not have even considered questioning the Committee’s judgment no matter what the decision.”

Mike is most favorable toward the idea of granting credit for life’s experiences but, thinking of what attracted him to Empire State College, criticizes the college’s recent change to the expression, “assessment of prior learning.”

You may have narrowed the number of people who apply here ... If you tell them that you will give credit for ‘learning’ you are going to scare a lot of people away because all they are sure they know is how to put the same nut in the same hole over and over again and most of us don’t consider that ‘learning.’ I see Empire State College as a tool to channel this deadening activity into a time for thinking. You can stand in front of a plant and ask 50 guys how much ‘learning’ they’ve had in the last 10 years and they will say ‘what are you, some kind of screw?’ But if you ask about ‘life’s experiences,’ they’ll tell you what they have learned. Some work with OEO, a lot are craftsmen, a lot paint, some are music bugs, many are involved with kids’ programs. After a guy gets in, it is up to you professionals to see how much he has learned. A few want something for nothing but no one expects it. Most just want a fresh start.

Mike’s overall feelings about his mentor are most positive. He described their bi-weekly meetings, two lunches and multiple phone calls as extremely sociable, interesting, intuitive, sincere, free, successful and pleasurable:

I was fortunate. I honestly believe I had the perfect mentor for me. He fitted me like a hand in a glove. The whole theory of the college is unique and this guy is unique in himself as an educator. If this school is to survive, it needs guys like him. I was amazed at his versatility, his flexibility, his uncanny knack of being able to put in front of me materials that I would find interesting but I would never have read in a lifetime.

Mike's evaluation of his growth and development in terms of the college objectives were mixed which mostly reflects his high degree of personal development upon entry to Empire State College. He rated his growth very low on interpersonal competence, self reliance and understanding of others feeling that these were strong points to begin with. He rated his growth more towards the middle of the scale in clarification of purpose, self-understanding and intellectual synthesis. Lastly, he rated his

growth while at Empire State College high in awareness, self consistency, knowledge, comprehension, evaluation and application.

Mike had difficulty in identifying the single best experience at Empire State but settled on "... receiving the A.A. I'm the first in my family to accomplish this and we all shared the happiness. Also, my children were impressed with how hard I worked to get the degree." He has used this degree with immediate success. Mike is now an international servicing representative for the UAW with responsibilities for interfacing grievances at plants in New England and upstate New York as well as handling the union's regional public relations and editing a new regional newspaper. In these activities, he notes that the Empire State College experience sharpened his abilities and broadened his outlook toward union management relations:

I've been doing a lot of work with arbitration cases lately, mostly writing

briefs. I find I am able to analyze critically and in an organized way. I also can cross examine more easily.

Mike came to Empire State College as an "uneducated" working man. He had little job security (as was proven when he was laid off for several months while an Empire State College student), little job satisfaction, and little reason to expect things to get better. Empire State College has meant to Mike the realization of his goals. He now has a degree which has brought him pride and more self confidence. He also has a more secure and better paying job and is considering graduate school. As Mike summarizes:

My career put me on first base, I got to second base because of my many life experiences, I got to third base because I was able to document them, and I got home because of Empire State College and my mentor.

On Learning to Play the Cello at 60: A Study in Polyphony

David Starr-Glass, Center for International Programs

The idea ... is not a subjective individual-psychological formation with 'permanent resident rights' in a person's head; no, the idea is inter-individual and inter-subjective – the realm of its existence is not individual consciousness but dialogic communion between consciousnesses. The idea is a live event, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses. (Bakhtin, 1984 p. 88).

Introduction

This reflection on dialogue and otherness salient, but certainly not restricted to, the process of the mentor engagement, was inspired by an exchange of correspondence with Elana Michelson, and is dedicated to her. Earlier drafts have benefited greatly from the shared thoughts and suggestions of many friends with whom I am in perpetual dialogue¹. That notwithstanding, all errors and deficiencies in this piece are uniquely and inevitably my own.

In many ways this short piece is retrospective although it was not my intent to dwell in, or on, the past. In many ways it also is commemorative – I have, after all, entered my 60th year of living and my 25th year of being associated with the Empire State College collegiate community: definitely reasons for celebration. But that celebration is more of the present, albeit a present grounded in what has been – a “perpetual possibility” in my “world of speculation,” as T. S. Eliot suggests; the celebration of being on a journey; and a celebration which is more calmly reflective than triumphal.

The metaphors and images invoked here are taken mainly from music and maps and transitions, but metaphor is not always intended or even suggested. These thoughts simply reflect the position that we are all on journeys with multiple purposes and with multiple possible destinations; and,

more often than not, it is not possible to distinguish between purpose and destination. In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* [*Le citta'*] there is an ongoing dialogue between Marco Polo and the Great Khan:

“Journeys to relive your past?” was the Khan's question at this point, a question which also could have been formulated; “Journeys to recover your future?” And Marco's answer was: “Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveler recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he does not have and never will have.” (Calvino, 1997 p. 29).

The First Voice

I tell him that I have always wanted to play the cello and that now, it seems to me, is an appropriate time to begin. He smiles. I don't tell him that there also is a sense of foolishness, or perhaps it is something more painful and more distanced, in even considering learning the cello in my 60th year. Yet he seems to have heard something beyond my words and, sipping thoughtfully on his coffee, he asks me why I would really like to play.

My narrative already there waiting to be used: pre-constructed, fashioned over the years and perfected recently, and yet somehow as I recite it, the words seem too artificially smooth, too superficial, and too unused. My first love, I tell him – I have settled for a romantic turn. I was 14 and Jacqueline du Pré was 16. I heard a live broadcast of her playing at a Henry Wood Promenade Concert: the Elgar cello concerto. Her presence was incredible, her playing beyond anything that I could have imagined. In that moment there was a passionate adoration of her and of the cello.

He looks at me. He is a gentle, caring person. He also is astute and a musician, an internationally recognized player of the



David Starr-Glass

mandolin. My narrative simply does not work, or if it does, it leaves out too much and does not include enough. I adore music? No – too insipid, too bland. The truth is that I have a deep and burning passion for music. I want to enter into the sound, into the harmony and into the intricate weaving of the resonating tapestry. I want to explore my unsung voice and my artful shuttle, incorporating my own expression of being in the weave. Now he hears that and so do I. He smiles and puts the coffee aside.

And why, he asks gently, do you seem so often to apologize for your age? A question, but it's really an answer to something that I didn't say. He looks at me, our eyes maintaining contact. Many people start to play musical instruments when they are older. You will learn quickly; you will play well and enjoy it. You already have a cultivated musical ear; you will know what you want to achieve. You will have fun. The answers, it would seem, to other unasked questions – or, rather, to questions that did not knowingly fill either of our mouths.

And when I meet Noa, my teacher, she has laughing eyes and smile that never leaves her

mouth. We talk and laugh and both know that we can begin this journey together: and we do. But, I say, there's one small problem: I don't have a cello. Another smile, quite impish this time. She picks up her phone and calls a friend, a luthier here in the center of Jerusalem. Yes, he makes cellos. Yes, he will rent one to me for a few months until I see how the lessons go. Now, there being no further impediment, we agree to start mastering the cello next week.

How do you communicate the wonder of getting fingers in the right place at the right time? Or how do you explain the wonder of bowed strings vibrating through your body? Or how do you describe the magic when you enter into the notes themselves and into the harmony and weave your own tapestry of sound? Often, we play duets and it's difficult to explain that although we are sitting physically well apart we are brought close together on waves of sound.

And when I strain too conscientiously to read the stream of notes and when I move fingers too laboriously to produce the intended sounds, Noa will call over to me: "David, don't play notes – make music!" And it's always at that moment that I get below the waves and enter the sea and, despite stinging eyes, move with growing confidence through the oceanic flow of sound.

The Second Voice

We sit in the darkness of a veranda. We have come to this ancient port on the Dalmatian coast to study Croatian language. We met here as strangers last year; this year we are no longer strangers. Earlier in the evening, I walked by the sea and marveled that it was heaving phosphorescent waves against the shore but we can't see those waves or hear them from where we sit.

There are pale stars overhead, not extinguished by the light pollution of the town. We are drinking ice-cold beer, smoking Marlboro reds. I used not to smoke but here I always do, simply because he does. We talk of this and that; fragments tossed out sometimes played with, sometimes considered, sometimes left alone undisturbed. In the silence there is a continuum. In the fractured thoughts there is an almost perfect dialogue. We listen to

the other: to the words spoken, to the words that remain unsaid.

Before tonight, we have exchanged a hundred e-mails and in one, he tells me that he sometimes meditates on *L'infinito*, by Giacomo Leopardi:²

*E come il vento
Odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello
Infinito silenzio a questa voce
Vo comparando: e mi sovviene l'eterno,
E le morte stagioni, e la presente
E viva, e il suon di lei. Così tra questa
Immensità s'annega il pensier mio:
E il naufragar m'è [m'e, with grave over the
e] dolce in questo mare.*

*And as I hear the wind
Rustle through these plants, I compare
That infinite silence to this voice:
and I recall to mind eternity,
And the dead seasons, and the one present
And alive, and the sound of it. So in this
Immensity my thinking drowns:
And to shipwreck is sweet for me in this sea.*

*And when I strain too
conscientiously to read
the stream of notes and
when I move fingers too
laboriously to produce
the intended sounds,
Noa will call over to me:
"David, don't play notes
– make music!"*

Wind rustling in the plants, that infinite silence and a sweet shipwreck loaming.

He flicks his cigarette end high into the air. It sails and summersaults like a dying firefly in the dark. Last night, I commented on his dexterity and he revealed the finer details of the elegant maneuver. But it was not that flick of the finger that I was really asking about and it was not really that which he showed me. In a few months time, when I flare with selfish anger at a seeming slight, I will remember this moment sitting

in the darkness of the veranda and I will understand this moment more clearly and with the deepest gratitude. I will recall more honestly that what he taught me was not about the disposal of spent cigarettes but more about the wind rustling in the plants and the infinite silence and the occurrence of eternity.

I think of the world into which we were created, a world that was supposed to be constructed of crystal-clear vessels designed to hold and display the unimaginable, pristine, primordial light. But in containing the uncontainable He erred, naturally contradicting His own self-imposed limits, and the vessels shattered and the world was born in a tsunami of incandescent light and shards of the fractured vessels: debris of lost possibilities, of futures not achieved.

Condemned – or it is content? – to journey in a landscape of broken vessels and scattered light. I am thinking of His infallibility and of His error. A God that, we are told, does not play with dice but who, it seems, sometimes accidentally drops them on the floor: the ultimate comfort, or perhaps the ultimate heresy. And I hear a resonance with the ever-present existentialist concern, captured so sharply by R. D. Laing (Laing, 1967 p. 33), "There's nothing to be afraid of. The ultimate reassurance and the ultimate terror." Nothing – the absence of anything – as comfort; nothing as dread.

Definition of a Jewish atheist: Someone who keeps apologizing to God because he/she cannot believe in Him. An ongoing journey though the knee-deep debris of those shattered primordial worlds – worlds of unrealized possibility, worlds of impossible perfection, looking among razor-edged shards for tiny fragments of occluded light: *Tikkun Ha'Olam*.

I have walked among the dark brittle, broken, razor-edged fragments for so many years, searching for pinpoints of light. Sitting in the darkness of the veranda, I discover occluded lights. I see points of scintillating presence poking through the fine veil of clouds: bright pinpricks outlining the town that lies beyond us. I see a trajectory of light in the dying firefly that was his finished cigarette. I see wisps of phosphorescence ripple through the air as we talk about nothing, and about everything.

I am holding his hand. His fingers tighten around mine. We sit in silent communion watching the clouds slowly moving over the stars.

The Third Voice

He is one of my undergraduate students in Prague and describes himself as “problematic.” That always causes me some concern. He asks if he can write his undergraduate dissertation on the price of oil. Well, I begin, that is an interesting subject, but will you simply be documenting the historic changes in that price, or will you be trying to explain something – cause, effect, market, you know that sort of thing? He prefers not to answer; or perhaps he can’t; or perhaps he wonders why I am asking such dead and desiccated questions? He was excited about the current high price of oil but now he is not sure why he should be so excited and it shows: the brightness in his eye seems to have faded – I wonder if this is yet another brilliant spark that my dark shadow has occluded. He promises to think some more about his options and send me another e-mail.

And he does. This time he has read a fascinating article about organ transplants. He will write a 50-page description of the market in human body parts. As part of his analysis, he will examine supply and demand and the determination of equilibrium prices for kidneys, and hearts, and livers, and all of the other human offal of this particular trade.

Marke, I say – Marke is the vocative case of the Czech name Marek (Mark): I am trying to demonstrate my rather slim grammatical credentials, hoping that this dubious authority might spread over into the more general argument that I am about to propose – Marke, that is indeed very interesting, but

The “but” consists of asking him to reflect on a question: What is the dissertation meant to do? He is unclear. We discuss – well no, I tell him – that the dissertation is an opportunity to demonstrate an awareness of the relevant literature in business and economic and analytical skills. Again he prefers not to answer; or, it now strikes me, he feels reluctant to answer because there was no obvious or satisfactory question. He

promises to think some more and send me another e-mail.

I wonder. Marek, you don’t want to enter this scary slalom, do you? You don’t want to demonstrate suitable critical awareness and thoughtful judgment, remain upright, and getting to the finishing tape with a credible academic paper, do you? You want to explore what interests you and the price of oil and the value of kidneys are actually something that have become part of our human and social experience. You will be doing the writing; I will be doing the reading – so who is the third party that I keep seeing over my shoulder? Why is that reader more privileged than you or I? What is the dissertation meant to do? What is it meant to do for me – and for you?

But I don’t tell him this, well not now, because other things are happening.

It’s at this point that he shares with me his contention that he is a problematic student. I wonder if this is a statement; or is it perhaps not a statement but the answer to a question that he thought that I had intended? I flush with embarrassment. You’re not problematic I say, stung into genuine humility by his use of the word. Who has the problem, Marek? Who has the problem? But, of course, I don’t say this to him either, although it is a part of our conversation and we both know it, even although it will remain unsaid.

I wait for his next e-mail. I will probably send him one myself, perhaps today.

And I do. A few weeks later I meet him in Prague and take him out to lunch. I had forgotten how bright his eyes were and we sit and discuss the market in human body parts. He is so happy to be heard. He is so happy to be listened to. He is excited. His eyes sparkle. I try to persuade him to have dessert: I wonder if he understands that I am really trying to apologize?

Listening as a Function of Learning

There are four strings and eight positions on each string for the hands. At the beginning, I thought linearly, trying to appreciate the tonal gradation that you could produce from a single string; exploring positions of fingers and notes. Then the realization that there is a second dimension running across the strings; that a finger position on

*As my body resonates
with the open G-string,
I wonder if perhaps the
sound actually comes
from within me: it seems
to be part of me. I close
my eyes and come to
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one, if transferred to another, will produce a note a musical fifth higher, or lower. And although you might have an appreciation of the physics of note production and harmony, you learn to play by listening. She refers to this as our common geography. And it is the potential tonal map on the fingerboard; a gradually explored territory that lies out there on the unfretted fingerboard of my cello.

That spatial geography of finger positions is overlaid on an invisible landscape of potential tones; that landscape is reflected, but not reproduced, on the sheet music that sits before me on the music stand. In turn those black marks on the score map yet another landscape, one that originally existed only for the composer. And there is yet another journey through the landscape that must be attempted: to produce music (not sound), which is informed by my own sense of music and the community, living and dead, of other cellists.

Here, at the Jerusalem Music Center, I am fortunate to be always given a front row seat at the chamber music performances; performances that take place in a small, intimate salon that doubles as a professional recording studio. I sit literally a few feet away from some of the finest cellists in Israel, and indeed often in the world; watching their hands, absorbing their music and listening even to their breath – breathing that anticipates the dynamics of the music, and flows with the melodic line. I also have learned to listen to Noa’s breathing.

Dialogues within dialogues, each meaningful in its own right but all coalescing into a single, magical whole.

Noa often encourages me to close my eyes and rely on the ability to feel and hear: sight, she says, is one of the faculties that you don't really need to play the cello. We always begin with a meditation on the open strings: generating smooth confident notes that come from this beautiful instrument that has become part of me. When I do this, I always close my eyes and move my bow through an unseen world: unseen but clearly remembered. As my body resonates with the open G-string, I wonder if perhaps the sound actually comes from within me: it seems to be part of me. I close my eyes and come to rely on the dialogue between touch and sound produced.

At the beginning, when I was starting to play, I would look over at her to see whether the D above middle C, which I thought I was playing, was in tune. Now she asks me to confirm these notes myself, checking them automatically with open strings or with a known fifth or octave or with some other recognized topographical feature of the tonal landscape. But I used to cheat. Her eyebrows would go up just a fraction if the pitch were wrong – there was always an almost imperceptible nod of her head when it was correct – a reliance on eyes overcame the insistence on ears. And she conspired, well initially at least, in this fraud by signaling me, almost imperceptibly, in my quest for the correct note. No more. Now she remains poker-faced, well almost poker-faced. Unspoken, perhaps even unintended dialogues.

And it is in these dialogues, these exchanges that we make sense: we make meaning. All dialogues are encounters with otherness; with that which is presently not understood, or with that which still remains alien. Sometimes exchange can be an internal one where the otherness encountered is the dark side of our own moon: mapping out the tentative domains of the social I-and-thou, or the metaphysical I-and-Thou (Buber, 1958); exploring the interaction between the I-and-me (Mead, 1934). From such a perspective, dialogue is the exchange with the otherness of self – that which presently stands outside the existential map – and contributes to the discovery, or perhaps

more correctly to the reclamation, of what we see as alien in ourselves – or alien in others.

More often, the discovery of otherness is not directly linked to existentialist concerns but to a broader system of knowing. I know that this has the pitch of the D above middle C because of a dialectical process of interrogating what I have come to know with what I am presently doing. Part of that process is the relative position of fingers and the subtle, changing movement of eyebrows. It is in this interrogation of otherness that I learn more about myself, as well as learn more about what is possible for me: an enrichment of my being.

Let him rather remain outside of me, for in that position he can see and know what I myself do not see and do not know from my own place, and he can essentially enrich the event of my own life (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 87).

That enrichment is always available but it is sometimes unrecognized, sometimes ignored and sometimes unnourished. When it is recognized, and supported, it can be an intense experience not simply of learning but of being. In those Dalmatian nights, he talked of European history and provided me with knowledge that was new and fresh. But he also allowed me to see myself, and my possible self, in a new and previously undiscovered way – because history, personal or communal, is not the

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events of the past but rather the matrix from which I am born. We spoke often of his beloved Venice, *La Serenissima Repubblica*, and those little seeds germinated later when I studied the history of this maritime republic (Lane, 1973) and, sitting alone and reading this text, I always hear his unasked questions and his unvoiced comments. I entered with him into the light, the shade and the subtle light reflected of Venice, even although I have only visited the city in my dreams and imagination.

As with Noa, eyebrows are always part of the dialogue, indeed eyebrows often indicate the nature of the underlying dialogue. Dialogues consist of at least three voices: those of the two engaged in the exchange and the third voice, which is consulted and referred to periodically for guidance, support and for direction. Sometimes the voices converge; sometimes they remain distinct and soar together in an amazing polyphonic tapestry. Sometimes, as in the so-called Magistral Dialogue, the first voice (taking its role from the third voice) is leading, informing and correcting the second. Here, the third voice refers to a nonvocalized “authoritative other.” Eyebrows are always a wonderful indicator of reliance on the third voice – arching, quivering and contorting depending on whether the dialogue is following the course dictated by custom, or tradition, or recognized authority (Cheyne and Tarulli, 1999).

It seemed natural when I first started to teach, and even when I later attempted to mentor, to use this dialogic style with students: I was always aware of, if not consciously listening for, the third authoritative other in our conversations. It makes life so much easier. It defines roles and legitimizes performances. I always used to wonder whether there was some perceived ambiguity in my own role and performance: a passing thought, and one obviously not shared with the authoritative other.

But, as I came to understand more of myself and to have less confidence with authoritative voices, I switched from the Magistral Dialogue to one in which the third voice is more reflective and capable of sustaining the question without silencing it with a dogmatic certainty: the Socratic Dialogue. In the Socratic voice there is

reassurance but there also is risk; comfort but also challenge. Here, I listen more clearly to what I say than to what the other says – not because of a disinterest in the other but because of a concern, perhaps even doubt, in myself.

There is a third dialogic genre, the Menippean Dialogue in which the third voice is mocking, playful, irreverent and redolent of what Bakhtin calls “carnival” – carnival that brings childishness and chaos, and usually churlishness and conflict. The mentoring relationship usually comes unstrung here; the dialogue losing its direction, or purpose – or rather taking on a new direction and purpose that challenges the imposition of authority or authoritative voices or experience. Such things are rather refreshing. Carnival, of course, can be seen as a preposterous assertion of the unvoiced, the difficult and the queer – it also can be seen as the carnal gate through which we must pass in order to see the depth of love and concern incarnate (Michelson, 1999).

The Preservation of Polyphony

The Czech poet Miroslav Holub in a remarkable poem, “Brief Thoughts on Maps,” tells of a young Hungarian lieutenant who, during World War I, was leading his patrol out into the Alps on a reconnaissance mission. It started to snow heavily and the commanding officer became fearful for the men: they had been missing for several days in the frozen, mountainous terrain. But the young lieutenant reappeared with his patrol and when asked how he had managed to navigate back to base, he said that one of the men found a map in his pocket:³

*To nás uklidnilo
Utábo*

That calmed us down.

*We pitched camp, lasted out the snow storm
and then with the map we discovered our
bearings.*

And here we are

The commanding officer’s relief turned to astonishment when he saw that the proffered map was of the Pyreneans, not the Alps. Holub always contended that the poem depicted a true event about which a close friend had told him.

As Alfred Korzybski famously remarked, “the map is not the territory.” Maps are translations of the territory and sometimes even when the detail is incorrect, the sense of there being a map with which to compare experience can “calm us down” and lead to a discovery of what is, rather than of what is represented: maps of the Pyrenees should not help us find our way in the Alps, but strangely they can. Perhaps it is in the forceful disconnect between expectation on the map and observed reality in the territory that leads to further exploration and to the recognition of half-forgotten paths? Perhaps it is the calmness of thinking that we become aware of possessing an inner map, which allows us to deal with ambiguity and strangeness? While the dynamics of the process remain illusive, in the last few years I have come to appreciate the veracity of Holub’s brief and extraordinary contemplation.

Increasingly, I find that the otherness encountered in maps – or indeed in the territory, or in the self – is not an aberration or something that has to be resolved, reconciled, or in some other way rendered invisible. The tension between the voices is now better appreciated; the ear has grown subtler in detecting and holding this apparent dissonance. Certainly, I have slowly discovered that questions, when actually asked, can result in answers unexpected, and that there is often a profound enrichment of self – and an appreciation of otherness, which might be the same thing – when I actively listen to both questions and answers, articulated or left unsaid.

When I see that his grades have plummeted during the semester, I can assume so many possibilities and yet his answer is something, which in my existentialist isolation, I could never have grasped. My realization of selfishness, which is the antithesis of self, is painful when I realize that I might never have asked him what the problem was – might never have shared his tears, or shed my own when he told me about sneaking his younger sister, dying fast from inoperable cancer, out for a forbidden meal at McDonald’s. Engagement with the other – with otherness – must begin with respect and a validation of that which is presently beyond self, seemingly alien and distanced. Engagement with otherness must begin with

the appreciation that it will inevitably bring surprise and occluded possibilities – possibly even shared tears and a closeness of souls (Starr-Glass, 2006).

Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) argues that one of the striking features of Dostoevsky’s novels is the way in which the characters presented usually express, and retain, different voices – voices that persist and which are neither muted nor changed throughout the progression of the work. It is this polyphony – this multiplicity of voices sustained and finding their own way through the work – that is so striking in Dostoevsky. From the outset, we know that otherwise quite similar characters in Tolstoy will gradually bend, mold and conform – one might suggest that they inevitably behave themselves and listen to Tolstoy’s own powerful and authoritative voice: they ultimately bow to their creator. While there are certainly those who would disagree, in part at least, with such an analysis (Wellek, 1980) for many captivated readers of Dostoevsky, it is his complex polyphonic layering that is so appealing and memorable. These are the voices that ring in our ears when the novel, or story, has been read and laid aside.

Perhaps this really is a retrospective viewing of so many dialogues – personal and professional (and perhaps it is often difficult to differentiate) – of which I have been a part. And perhaps the thing that I have learned is that while otherness always exists, it often is a deep and unrecognized part of self. The mystery of otherness is not diminished when it dissolves in recognition. The magic of otherness is not lessened when we recognize its shadow within self. Impoverishment of self is the failure to recognize the other, the inability to appreciate its proximal effect on our own learning and growth.

Learning to play the cello is not a metaphor for anything although it can be seen as one and used as one. Rather, it is an engagement with otherness and with the person that we were not previously. It is an excursion into a new territory, with or without a map. It is, or it has been my experience, a refining of my ability to hear the other voice and to stay with that voice without deserting my own – although, perhaps, incrementally changing my voice in response to the sustained tension or harmony that

exists between the voices. I have become simultaneously a speaker and a listener; what I say is moderated by what I hear and by the anticipation of what we might say together.

I am listening to the wind in the trees and the far off sound of the waves on the Dalmatian coast. I am listening to the noiseless flight of the spiraling cigarette end that glows faintly in the darkness. I am listening to what he says and what he does not say as we sit under a starry sky that is being invaded by clouds. I am listening to Noa and, as we play together, realize that I am not listening to her or to me, but to us. I listen with closed eyes to resonance of the open strings and realize that they are my extended voice, my new voice and my unexplored vocalization.

Today, I will invite Marek to lunch with me in Prague. I will listen to him – really listen to him – and try to understand what possibilities exist in that shared land that is between us.

Separate, persistent, changing, modulated voices – the polyphony within which I try to understand others and myself. It has taken time to listen to the otherness and to sustain their voices in my own world. It has taken time to listen to my own voice and allow it to speak, saying things that I did not understand or accept.

When Marco and the Kahn sit in their pleasure garden and talk of journeys and cities visited, we are left with the growing sense that what Marco describes as strange and fantastical cities are all reflected facets of his beloved Venice. Exploration might not mean visiting different places but rather seeing the ever-changing difference that was passed over as familiar: exploration has a temporal as well as spatial endeavor.

... from that real or hypothetical past of his, he is excluded, he cannot stop; he must go to another city, where another of his pasts awaits him, or something perhaps that has been a possible future of his and is now someone else's present. Futures not achieved are only branches of the past: dead branches (Calvino, 1997 p. 29).

Endnotes

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- ² *L'infinito* by Giacomo Leopardi (1798 - 1837) translated by Mike Towler. Retrieved on March 3, 2008: <http://www.tcm.phy.cam.ac.uk/~mdt26/poems/leopardi1.html>.
- ³ *Brief Thoughts on Maps*, by Miroslav Holub (1923 - 1998) is taken from his collection of poems *Notes to a Clay Pigeon* (1977). Trans. Jarmila and Ian Milner. London: Secker and Warburg (1977). In this regard, it might be useful to understand that “Holub” means “pigeon” in Czech. Also see Starr-Glass (2005).

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Faculty Voices: A Cinderella Story at the PLA Ball

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Purpose

In the fall of 2007, the Assessment Group (a working group consisting of the centers' directors of academic review and assessment specialists and the Office of Collegewide Academic Review staff) created four task groups to look at the various aspects of academic review. As part of its goal to understand better the practices of prior learning assessment (PLA), one of these task forces, Prior Learning Assessment Processes and Practice (PLA P&P), decided to explore the ways in which mentors work with students concerning the development and evaluation of individualized PLA. The PLA P&P task force was interested in knowing about mentor practices in order to help inform the college about its own PLA practices and to encourage greater dialogue about these practices, including evaluator training. In particular, the PLA P&P wanted to examine Empire State College's institutional practices to assemble a body of knowledge that stemmed from both an academic and a practitioner point of view, which was infused with a scholarly approach.

The group felt that it was important that this body of knowledge evolve directly from talking to mentors about their experiences rather than from the institutional knowledge (or mythology) about what is being done. The use of this knowledge was seen as an opportunity to help inform everyone in the PLA process (new or experienced; faculty, staff or student) about the ways in which PLA is conducted at the college. In other

words, we wanted to have a way to talk about what we do at Empire State College.

Procedures

In mid-January 2008, we invited 20 mentors from across the college to examine and reflect upon their practices with students regarding prior learning assessment. The mentors joined together in a teleconference where we presented four questions that addressed the practices that they use to help students get at college-level knowledge. At All College (2008), another 18 mentors and five academic review staff gathered to continue the discussion based on the same four questions. The sessions were taped and transcribed, and were then used to identify themes from the discussions.

The four questions were designed to engage mentors in discussing their practices regarding the different parts of the PLA process. The questions asked of the mentors were:

Question 1. How do mentors help students understand what is meant by college equivalent learning?

The first question was designed to learn more about how mentors think about identifying college-level learning and how they go about helping students identify this knowledge. The question strives to also develop an understanding of how we, as a college, think about how we define college-level learning.

Question 2. As part of the PLA process, how important is it for students to be

able to discuss the theory that undergirds their knowledge?

The second question looks at the balance between the theoretical and the practical aspects of the knowledge. Often, in the discussion of what is college-level learning, there is an assumed criterion that the student can apply theory to various situations; yet, is it really a requirement that someone have a theoretical underpinning of a topic to be considered to have college-level knowledge of that topic?

Question 3. How do we help students move from tacit understanding of what they know to explicit knowledge?

The third question asks mentors how they help students think about and extract their tacit knowledge and transform this into some form of explicit knowledge. Research (e.g., Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986) indicates that the more experience a person has in a field, the more tacit the knowledge becomes, so it is possible that a more highly experienced student may find this a more difficult task than a student who has much less experience.

Question 4. How do mentors help students through the PLA process on those occasions when the mentor's knowledge of the field of study in which a student is seeking credit is limited or nonexistent?

The fourth question aims to look at how mentors work with students in areas in which the mentor is unfamiliar. When the mentor does not have knowledge of an

area, s/he is more dependent upon his/her knowledge and practice of mentoring students through PLA, rather than using the base knowledge of an area to help guide the practice. That is, the mentor depends more on the process itself rather than on their knowledge of a topic area. As a result, the ways in which mentors work with students in areas outside of their own field can inform ways in which PLA practices exist within the college.

Results

Three major themes came out of these conversations with mentors. Each is discussed below.

Theme I

There seems to be a continuum between two major viewpoints regarding PLA practices. One could think of this continuum as a stick with two ends, where each end represents the extreme of two different mental models¹ that mentors hold as viewpoints about what is college-level knowledge, and thus how practices are engaged. Strauss, Ravid and Magen (1998) have shown that the mental models that faculty hold about the way to teach is a stronger influence on the way that they practice teaching than the level of the subject matter that they teach, their subject knowledge, or their experience. Understanding the mental models of the faculty involved in the PLA process can give us a glimpse into their practices.

The results did show that most mentors are somewhere in between the two different viewpoints, but there were a few mentors who tended to be closer to each end of the spectrum. Overall the mentor/student process can be equated to an archeological dig. The mentor and student dig away at the student's knowledge and sift, find, identify and place it within a particular model of what they determine is the college-level knowledge. The mentor's mental model of PLA informs this archeological dig in that the ways in which things (i.e., artifacts of the learning) are found, and the ways in which the "artifacts" are named and placed within a context will be dependent on this pre-existing mental model of PLA (Strauss, Ravid and Magen, 1998; Hofstadter, 2001).

The Two Mental Models

At one end of the stick spectrum, we found the viewpoint to be oriented to learning as being "topic-based," whereby the characteristics of the knowledge can be found in the topic itself. For example, one mentor stated, "There is an epistemological view: How the learner knows what they've learned? How do you know what you know? If that can be articulated, then [the student] reflects a level of understanding comparable to what we expect in college study." Another mentor states, "I ask what experience and where they learned it ... [and then I] show the student examples of requests for credit by evaluation; [I] show materials, documentation for a successful request." Another said, "take supervisory experience: if a student has experience and reflects upon it to arrive at commonly-taught college-level principles, then that is evidence of college-level learning ... " One comment regarding exams also stresses this viewpoint, "in the end, sometimes students see the exam as the easier option. They go take a test for an hour, and it's done and they know the result. They don't have to think about what they know, analyze it, or explain it. Even when I have students doing PLA, sometimes they just would rather take a test to demonstrate knowledge in other areas. I think it's a matter of how comfortable they are with the topic."

... the mentor/student process can be equated to an archeological dig. The mentor and student dig away at the student's knowledge and sift, find, identify and place it within a particular model of what they determine is the college-level knowledge.

Turff (1999) refers to this type of knowledge orientation as an "objectivist" viewpoint. From the objectivist viewpoint, knowledge of a topic is seen as pre-defined, with the topic having distinct characteristics that are verifiable by outside resources. In many ways, this viewpoint is in alignment with an academy-based viewpoint in that the outside resources are often set by topics taught by other colleges and universities. Turff refers to this mental model as a "folk pedagogy," emphasizing that most of the academy is based on this viewpoint because this is the experience of learning that faculty have experienced themselves.

In many ways, this approach deconstructs the learning as something that is objectifiable; the topic is decontextualized and examined for characteristics that match predetermined criteria and then put back together within the context of what has already been determined by the academy. Using the archeological metaphor, the artifacts are assigned names and meaning based on what is already known about these types of artifacts. In the process of determining the meaning of and assigning meaning to the artifacts, the mentor and student defer to an outside authority that has made previous claims as to what knowledge should exist, which becomes included in the documentation of the learning.

At the other end of the stick spectrum, we found the viewpoint to be "dialogically-based," whereby learning becomes a process that is discovered as part of the dialogue between the mentor and student while determining what learning exists. This mental model uses more of a phenomenological approach to discovering what college-level learning exists. For example, one mentor describes that "being unambiguous about standards for what college-level and/or advanced means, setting rules, procedures, policies, could cut us off from discovering learning we might not already know about – learning about learning that I didn't know existed. What about things that don't fit all the rules? What about things that don't suit a policy statement? There are identifiable contexts, right? However, who could claim to know them all? Working with new students teaches us new ones all the time." There

also was a strong view that the student has a center of authority in his/her learning about what was relevant college learning. For example, one mentor stated: “If a student can judge whether their own and/or others’ pictures have good composition, is that not a substantive claim? A student can look at a painting and point out something about it and say ‘there’s a lot of action there; there’s a lot happening’ [is that not] a substantive claim?”

Some mentors viewed that their role was central in the discourse, for example, “[the] mentor’s curiosity about a new knowledge can bring them to inquire further and learn ... [The] student’s ability to provide discourse is both essential as part of their learning as well as the mentor’s learning.” Another point made by a mentor was: “There exist two different ‘learning moments’ [during] a discussion with the [student and] mentor, ... the introduction and the ‘fleshing-out.’” This concept of “fleshing-out” also was seen in another mentor’s statement, “Asking the student to explain can help them when they later need to write their request for credit. [In one case] basket/blanket weaving resulted in upper-level college credit due to the student’s knowledge of the culture from which they came.”

Turff (1999) refers to this phenomenological type of knowledge orientation as a “subjectivist” viewpoint. He states that in this position the “sources and justification for knowledge is in the sociocultural realm. An assertion is accepted as true or false through social interaction – in shared discourses through which members of a culture negotiate the meanings attached to objects, events and symbols” (p. 201). Ball and Lai (2005) argue that the mentoring process is an ethnographic encounter, in that the mentor “has the ultimate academic authority to interpret students’ learning” as does the ethnographer in whatever culture is being studied. In the same analogy, Ball and Lai point out that it is through the discourse that the mentor learns what a student knows and helps to co-create the naming of that learning. The naming of this learning is dependent on the discourse and the co-creation process, prior to which the learning may not have existed in the same format as what it is in its finality. In other words, the

learning, in part, grew out of the discourse rather than existing in totality prior to the mentor working with the student.

In the phenomenological viewpoint, the student goes through an exploration of the topic, and through this process the characteristics of the knowledge are constructed by looking at the topic within the context of experience and the social discourse between the mentor and the student, rather than by looking at what others say about the topic. This intersubjective constructive approach means that the learning cannot be predefined because the awareness or definition of what is college-level learning emerges from the experience. Relating this back to the archeological dig metaphor, as new artifacts are uncovered, other aspects of the surroundings, other artifacts, etc. all become part of the picture and new perspectives are created by what is uncovered. In other words, it is like an archeological dig that unearths artifacts belonging to a culture never previously known to exist. All new ideas and concepts about the artifacts are created based on this initial discovery. The topics are viewed as a place to learn what college-level knowledge is and the mentor and student discover together what is to be found out. In this way, there is a self-authorship in what is considered college-level knowledge.

Another way to look at these two ends of the stick is by looking at the way the definition of knowledge has evolved. According to Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (11th edition) the word “knowledge” has a modern meaning that uses it as a noun, but for Middle and Early Modern English, “knowledge” was a verb. Prior to the 1600s knowledge “functioned as a transitive verb meaning both ‘acknowledge’ and ‘to recognize, admit, or confess the fact or truth of (something)’” (NPR radio broadcast, Word for the Wise, 2008).

Interestingly, each of the two viewpoints described previously uses one of the meanings of “knowledge” as a way to delineate or compose the knowledge that a student has. The objectivist viewpoint uses “knowledge” as a noun; knowledge is considered something that exists and can be identified. On the other hand,

the phenomenological viewpoint uses “knowledge” as a verb, a process that evolves into a form of recognition of what exists. The point here is that both mental models exist as equally valid viewpoints and are both recognized in the world of education (Turff, 1999).

Theme II

For the mentors, the process of working with students was very much at a tacit level. In other words, the mentors clearly had an understanding of their work with the students, but it was difficult for that understanding to be described and communicated in explicit ways. In order for someone to talk about what they know tacitly, they first have to translate the tacit knowledge into other forms of knowing that can then be explicitly explained (Hofstadter, 2001). This is not an easy task.

... the mentors clearly had an understanding of their work with the students, but it was difficult for that understanding to be described and communicated in explicit ways.

When mentors talked about college-level learning and helping students understand when their own knowledge was equivalent to college level, the mentors expressed their practices in action terms rather than goal-oriented terms. For example, when mentors were asked how they helped students understand what is meant by college-equivalent learning (first question), the responses were focused on the steps that they take (“[I have them] look at descriptions of college courses, college texts”). The mentors discussed the actions that they took with students as a way to discuss the underlying reasons behind their practices, but didn’t express directly what

it was that they were trying to accomplish. This also was seen when mentors were asked how they helped students move from a tacit understanding of what they know to explicit knowledge (the third question). When asked probing questions from members of the PLA P&P task force, the mentors still did not dig down into the purposes and goals of what they were doing with students. Clearly from the discussions, there were reasons for what the mentors did as practices, but these reasons operated at such a deeper understanding (tacit level) that it was often difficult for the mentors to make them explicit.

The ways in which mentors discussed their work with students is very similar to the research on the ways individuals develop expertise. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) describe that as one becomes more expert at something, the understanding of what you know becomes more and more implicit. Often research (e.g., Adelson, 1984) has shown that the more novel the experience, the easier it is to explain what is going on because the knowledge has not become as imbedded in the neural pathways. In addition, it is hard to step back and see what it is that you do. Sheckley (2008, this issue) states, “if you watch yourself doing something you really can’t see everything you’re doing, so it’s an incomplete picture that’s being transferred. There is a great deal of what we know that we use as the basis to make a selection among the millions of neural impulses that are happening at a point – so much so, that we’re not aware of it. It’s embedded in this mental model of how the world works and how we want things to happen based upon the experiences that we’ve had, and in those experiences, a great deal of the knowledge we gained is tangled within the experience. It’s implicit.”

Theme III

No one from the two groups seemed to have a working definition of “college-level learning.” It is something we can talk about, it is something that we can give examples for, but it is not something for which we have a tried and true definition. The literature on PLA also talks about the process of determining college-level learning without ever defining what it is. The lack of an operative definition leaves the option

for both points of view described in Theme I, since both can co-exist and not violate a definition (or policy). This also fits the culture at Empire State College.

Discussion

There is a familiar story with which many of us grew up: Cinderella. Cinderella is forced through life circumstances to tend to the fire (cinders) and serve her mean stepmother and stepsisters. Then in comes her fairy godmother who through her magic wand gives Cinderella the tools, which enable her to attend the local ball and win the heart of the prince. When she drops the glass slipper, the prince seeks her out and finds her.

There is another form of the story, not as well known in this country but is told elsewhere, called Cap O’Rushes. In this case, Cap O’Rushes is the daughter of a wealthy man and becomes exiled from her home based on a misunderstanding by her father. She leaves her home and disguises herself as a servant (using a cap of rushes) and obtains work within a neighboring wealthy home. Cap O’Rushes learns of a ball and sneaks off in a fine dress that she has brought from her past life. At the ball, she meets the handsome young son of the master of the home at which she is now serving, but leaves before he can discover her identity. After a series of balls that Cap O’Rushes secretly attends, the young man grows ill in despair over wanting to know who this beautiful woman really is. Cap O’Rushes decides to go to the prince in her servant clothes to heal him and shows him her ring, which identifies her as the mysterious woman he seeks. In the end, Cap O’Rushes also has her father invited to the wedding feast and tricks him into seeing how he misunderstood her.

No one from the two groups seemed to have a working definition of “college-level learning.”

In many ways, these two versions of a story are similar to how mentors approach working with students to develop their PLA requests. The objectivist view is very much the Cinderella story. Through the work of an outside authority (the fairy godmother) students are given the tools that they need to accomplish the task. On the other hand, the phenomenological view is very much like the Cap O’Rushes story in that the student uses self-authority to script the learning that takes place. In the story, it is through dialogue that Cap O’Rushes discovers there is a ball and learns of the young man’s failing health; it is through dialogue that the young man learns of her identity; it is through dialogue that her father understands what before he misunderstood. In the phenomenological view, the dialogical process is critical in the discovery of learning. Both stories are true stories (as myths, at some level, always are) and each is as valid as the other. In fact, many mentors expressed ways in which they worked with students that tended to blend the two.

This raises more questions than we have answers: Is there a tendency for two separate camps within Empire State College, or is there really a blend of these two philosophies? Is there a difference in the approach that a mentor uses when working with different students or topics or does the mental model stay consistent throughout the mentoring career, as Strauss, Ravid and Magen (1998) have observed? Does one of these models prevail in the Empire State College culture? Is one end of the stick fatter? Or, are the two models equally balanced? Is there a tendency to be closer to one end of the stick (two fat ends) or is the continuum fairly even (a nice even stick)? Are there other mental models that we have not unearthed? Another question raised within the All College session was: Is there a context to the philosophy used? In other words, is the approach dependent on the area of study? Will the approach shift depending on the type of learning that the student is unearthing?

The implications are enormous as we begin to look at how the mental model influences the various roles (mentor, instructor, evaluator, assessment committee member, etc.) people have in the PLA process. How strongly do these mental models

impact students' work? This also raises the question: How do these viewpoints support or not support student-centeredness?

Self-awareness of how a mentor uses his/her approach with students can help illuminate whether the current practice is student-centered and student-supportive. Self-awareness of the philosophical mental model that one holds can help the mentor to be purposeful about his/her approach and perhaps try to blend in some of the other philosophies.

In terms of tacit versus explicit knowledge, we realize that we need to dig deeper to understand why mentors do what they do when they are working with their students. There is a parallel with our findings and the process that mentors are asking the students to go through to explain their prior college-level learning. When students are fairly expert in their area, it may be harder for them to be explicit about something they know at a tacit level. When faculty members are highly experienced in mentoring, it may be harder for them to explain how they view and guide the PLA process. This may create parallel situations that struggle to meet. In other words, when students struggle with the PLA process, the mentor may need to examine how much of the guidance operates at a tacit rather than at an explicit level. There is more that needs to be explored here, but the awareness that most knowledge is tacit (estimated at about 80 percent for adults, Sheckley 2008) may help mentors explore the ways in which they can be more explicit with students.

Another series of questions that arose out of this small study centered on the lack of a definition of "college-level learning." If there were a set definition for college-level learning/knowledge, would that imply set parameters to dictate what it would look or sound like, how it would taste or feel? Is the fact that we lack a set definition one reason why some professionals have a hard time understanding how one can assess prior college-level learning at all? Is college-level learning only definable by the process

that we use to define it? Is it the practices that we use and recognize that constructs knowledge as college level? Is what counts as a qualification not just about the qualification but also about who recognizes the qualification?

What is important to recognize is that the PLA process at Empire State College also is like the Cinderella and Cap O'Rushes tales. In many ways, PLA tends the cinders – it takes a back seat to much of the discussions and focus on teaching and learning, yet it also is the star of our college in that it is a critical component of how we address the learning that our adult students bring with them. As a task force, we realized that it is important that we keep the dialogue going and find ways to raise these and many more questions and seek to learn more about their answers.

At this point, the team plans to continue the dialogue with mentors. We think that we have just scratched the surface and there is much more to understand and illuminate. We welcome your feedback and encourage you to be in touch with a member of the group if you are interested in being involved in further discussions.

Notes

- ¹ The term "tacit knowledge" used in this paper does not refer to a set, definable knowledge, but rather to the ways in which the brain functions at a level that is not explicit or in anyone's awareness. The term "mental model" refers to the ways in which one frames the world (including assumptions, perceptions and emotions) based on past experiences and then how one uses and adapts that framework to view and make sense of new experiences. Both these concepts takes into account how the brain re-invents itself (see Sheckley, this issue) and how the construction of thought is emergent through self-dialogue and dialogue with others.

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Walking on the Mild Side: Mindfulness in Personal Risk Management

Anne Breznau, Office of Academic Affairs

The following piece is an edited written version of a presentation and experiential workshop that was guided by Anne Breznau at the All Areas of Study Meeting, 2006.

You probably have noticed the increased attention higher education is paying to meditation as a foundation for focused attention in critical reading and other things. Our own Robert Altobello and others made a presentation on this topic at the 2005 All College Conference and, along with Kate Spector and Nina Thorne, at the 2007 All Areas of Study Meeting. Additionally, I'm beginning to see this topic in higher education magazines and conversations. So, it seemed appropriate to share my thoughts on the application of mindfulness to our own personal responses to risk.

With that in mind, I was going to talk today about the importance of meditation as a change agent in personal risk management. And then I saw the movie "An Inconvenient Truth," and I wondered how finding stillness and being mindful would affect personal risk and response to global warming.

I was going to talk today about the effect that finding stillness in my mind would have on personal risk management. And then a young friend's husband was diagnosed with a rare and generally fatal blood disease. He was a Buddhist monk most of his life. I wondered how being mindful could protect anyone from personal health risks.

I was going to talk today about the effect that finding stillness in my mind (or yours) would have on personal risk management. And then I watched the news. It seemed as though violence, greed and death were elements of personal risk I couldn't ignore.

I was going to talk today about the effect of mindfulness in personal risk management and then I looked at the chaos on my desk and at the work it sometimes feels like

I can't possibly keep up with. I wondered what mindfulness could contribute to managing the personal risks related to my work life.

What to do?

After pacing and reading, drafting and deleting, several times, I finally did what I always do. I meditated. It was such a relief to come home to my breathing and to remember again that breath represents life.

After meditating, I realized that I *am* going to talk today about the effect that finding stillness in our minds has on personal risk management. I am going to talk about it *because* of the personal risks and responses towards global warming; *because* meditation didn't protect my friend's young husband from suddenly facing possible death; *because* of the violence, greed and death that is on the news every day; and *because* I work in an organization that is engaged in a powerful change process so that some of us feel at risk of not being able to handle it all.

If you are like me, you are always aware of risk at some level. You know that the world is a hectic and violent one and this contributes to our sense of personal risk. Life is a risk and death is a certainty. Life also is a rich and wonderful experience.

However, the world and the world of work may not support the rich and wonderful aspects of life at times. We are bombarded by television, traffic, Internet information, e-mail, cell phones and other so-called communication devices. This contributes to our assessment of safety and our sense of risk. Cell phones, for example, make me feel less at risk. Television makes me feel more at risk.



Anne Breznau

It is so easy to separate ourselves from responsibility for the state of the world and the state of our work world, isn't it? It is easy to see it as *other* than ourselves, as not of our making. Those darn online courses, for example, that term calendar, that student load, I can't escape. Work is always with me now. It seems like it wasn't always like this.

It is so easy to see ourselves as victims of the world and of changes at work. It is easy for our sense of agency in personal risk management to change as things around us change.

Upon reflection, it is clear to me that both the work world and the world beyond our day-to-day job life are a reflection of the possibilities of our hearts. We are all capable

of going to war in one sense or another. We would all like to force others to change to fit our preferences. Maybe risk isn't so much about change as about the fact that it's not our change: we didn't get it to happen our way. Even though we may think of ourselves as incredibly involved beings, we're capable of destructive responses in the face of change over which we feel no agency. Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, suggests another way to look at it: "Even my worst enemy and myself are not wholly separate" (p. 90).

We are not victims of our worlds. They do not make life risky for us. Our worlds are a reflection of what is possible and real in our own minds. In a national bestseller, *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Stephen Batchelor, a former monk in both the Zen and Tibetan traditions, describes the world as in a state of mind that he calls "acute anguish." He goes on to show how humans experience themselves as trapped in it, feeling like victims. He writes, "We find ourselves spinning in a vicious circle. The more acute the anguish, the more we want to be rid of it, but the more we want to be rid of it, the more acute it gets" (p. 41). This certainly creates a feeling of personal risk.

And it's always been this way because as humans, we have always been this way – worried about our personal safety, worried about our personal happiness, willing to put the planet or the financial health of others in harm's way to sustain our personal safety and happiness. Buddhist teaching speaks of "ethical integrity," as the "intelligence to understand the present situation as the fruition of former choices, and the courage to engage with it as the arena for the creation of what is to come" (Batchelor, p. 47). So, the world's state of acute anguish comes from the cumulative choices of humans throughout time. And, the future of the world will come from our courage in engaging with the world and with its "acute anguish."

There's always a sense in the world of mindfulness practice that "we're all in this together," that what I do and feel matters because it helps to shape the whole of creation.

To put it another way, again in the words of Buddhist writer Stephen Batchelor, "personal

identity is a fiction, a tragic habit that lies at the root of craving and anguish" (p. 36). So, the very notion of personal risk is a difficult one for Buddhists. They would say we are "attached" to a notion of personal risk, rather than that we "have" personal risk – that we are "attached" to our personal safety. They believe it is preferable to bring all creatures to well being equally with ourselves.

To do this, we have to go against our belief in the privileged status that individuality and personal rights have in the Western world. To bring this about, Buddhists believe, as do I, in clearing the mind through meditation – of letting go of personal thoughts, opinions, senses of privilege or victimhood, judgments and even feelings about risk. Instead, Buddhists ask us to be still and be empty of our individual needs and desires. This is incredibly difficult to do. If you don't believe me, stop sometime and try to clear your mind of your personal noise.

Let's stop a minute and try this. Let's try to empty our minds for just 30 seconds – 30 seconds of internal silence. How? Focus on something tangible like your breath, your heartbeat, or the feeling of your feet on the floor. That is your touch point. Every time you notice you're not aware of the thing you chose, bring yourself back.

We could go to the northernmost tip of Maine, or into the deepest desert night, or shut ourselves in a closet if that's a quiet place, and just listen. We may, for a moment, hear the vast, living silence of nature or the sound of our heartbeat pounding in our ears. But, within nanoseconds, we will hear our mind begin judging nature and ourselves, we will think about someone who irritates or pleases us, we will replay conversations that went well or badly, we will assess whether we are appreciating nature well enough, we will assess risk: Will I suffocate in this closet? Will I be raped or killed in the wilderness? What should I do to protect myself? Our minds are full, generally they are full – dare I say it? – of crap. They are full of waste products of our history and our lifetime.

Both the world and our work world may be noisy, busy, hectic and risky. Our minds, however, also are noisy, busy, hectic and creators of risks. We are uncomfortable

any other way. If you think that's not true, try being silent. I was trained as a psychotherapist. The hardest thing we had to learn was to sit quietly and wait for the client to speak. All of us wanted to rush in and fill the silence.

This is incredibly difficult to do. If you don't believe me, stop sometime and try to clear your mind of your personal noise.

Throughout history, mystics and spiritual people have touted the value of a certain focused silence that some call mindfulness. Recently, the medical profession and academics have begun exploring the mind-body connection as well. One notable academic voice that comes to mind is Jon Kabat-Zinn, professor of medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. His book, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness* (2005), cites research by Martin Seligman and many others showing the effect that thought has on such things as age at death and ability to heal. From another perspective entirely, Lame Deer, medicine man of the Oglala people says, "You got to look at things with the eye in your heart, not with the eye in your head" (from a poster, no source).

Unlike the minds full of racing, rambling thoughts that we spoke of earlier, mindfulness is a state of remembering. It's a state of remembering our true nature, part spirit, part physical being. It's awareness of the fragile wonder of mortality. It's not the same as thinking about mortality. It's sitting with yourself in a focused, silent way, noticing inner and outer reality as it comes, not judging, not evaluating, not telling a story, just noticing reality as it comes by. This may include watching your thoughts float by, noticing emotions that you are feeling, hearing birds or children's voices or traffic in the distance. According to experts like Seligman and Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness can help us manage and possibly transform

our definition of agency and our sense of personal risk.

To let go of our personal stuff, the recurring floaters in our minds, we first have to get really up close and personal with it. Meditation is one way to do this. How so? For example, when I sit in meditation, I start by noticing my breath. Soon I recognize pain in my legs or back and then I start to wonder if I should go see the chiropractor. I notice this and bring myself back to the breath. Or, I sit quietly and start thinking about an annoying person at work that I need to confront. I notice this and bring myself back to the breath. Pema Chodron, a highly respected, contemporary Buddhist writer, says that when our mind drifts away, we need to say to ourselves: “Thinking.” This word makes it a self-reflection, not a judgment (Chodron, p. 21). She wants us to see the difference between risk and thinking about risk, between pain and thinking about pain. On that same point, Jon Kabat-Zinn distinguishes between pain, the physiological event and suffering, our response to the event.

What is the purpose of this marvelous practice called mindfulness and how do we begin to develop it?

For me, the purpose is to manage fear and not dramatize the risks of life. It also keeps me grounded and makes me a better person. Often, I have chosen to stop and breathe before I respond to a hurtful e-mail at work, for example, so I don’t perpetuate the hurt in me or the other person. Eventually, meditation also makes me notice who I am in the big picture. I often feel fear when I get to this point. If I can let that be and just notice it, I suddenly feel softer and I begin to accept and then cherish my life. As I do that, I begin to experience what the Buddhists call “loving kindness towards the world,” beginning with myself. Suddenly, the smallest thing is a miracle. I may be sitting on the floor playing with my dog, and I notice her eyes are like agates. Her fur is rough and rumpled. I notice too the pictures of my family on the opposite wall and it’s as if they are with me at that moment. Time stands still and life right there on the floor with my dog feels precious, graceful. There is only this moment.

So, that sounds pretty wonderful, doesn’t it? Why don’t we have that all the time? How do we get so that we have more and more of those moments. Why is it so hard to stay in a mindful state, fully awake? The Buddha called that state enlightenment or waking up.

It’s a wonderful state but most of us initially are uneasy with it, uncomfortable when our minds are not busy. We fight inner and outer silence both consciously and unconsciously. We have the TV on even if we’re not watching, we have the car radio going and we’re on our computer or cell phone. These aren’t bad things. If we were fully aware of ourselves watching TV, that would be mindfulness. However, most of the time, these noises take the place of focused attention to this moment’s reality. They help us forget the reality of physical aging and death. They help us keep distance from the person next to us. They help us forget about the real risks of life. We don’t, in other words, really make friends with human nature. Not so with mindfulness. In mindfulness, sometimes we feel our connection to the vibrations of the universe and the vast, full silence of life.

The most frequently recommended way to achieve mindfulness is through meditation. And the most frequently cited meditation practice is awareness of the breath (chanting and dancing are practiced by some groups, but in the West we’ve mostly learned to meditate through awareness of our breathing). It sounds silly, doesn’t it? Too simple, we think. *I* thought so. Boy was I wrong! It is virtually impossible for me to focus on anything for more than a few seconds. And that’s true for most of us. But, say, we practice meditation for several days, and absolutely nothing happens? Instead, we feel bored, restless, silly. Believe it or not, that is something. We noticed, we were aware of those feelings. It’s a beginning. At the same time as we practice, changes begin to happen although we might not connect the changes to the meditation. Perhaps we start getting along with someone at work who used to upset us. Perhaps we start recycling in a more serious way. Perhaps we feel safer in a situation where we used to feel risk. Perhaps we are more patient with our partner or one of our children. Perhaps we really “see” a student who has been a thorn

in our side. So meditation may seem to be going badly but, in the meantime, our life is changing. If we’re becoming more aware, we may notice that things are changing for the better. So, we stick to it. And, one day we realize that we are really hearing and feeling our breathing. Everything slows way down and we seem to feel the very breath of life within us. Or something else entirely may happen. But the point is you’ll be one with it, present to whatever it is and time will stop.

We are awake for a moment. That’s the point, really.

Meditation is not so much an end in itself. It is the path to being truly awake at this moment to this moment of life. The ability to recall yourself in the midst of anything is difficult for most of us to achieve. Some few more evolved souls, perhaps, like Jesus, Gandhi, Buddha, Mother Theresa, seemed to be awake to their true natures and to live from that awakened state all the time. For me and for most, it takes a great effort. In fact, it’s so hard that meditation practice or yoga or whatever can become the goal in itself. Really, it’s not about being a great meditator. It’s about being awake while you stack the dishwasher or work on your student evaluations, or sit with a mentee, or make love. Meditation practices are

Really, it’s not about being a great meditator. It’s about being awake while you stack the dishwasher or work on your student evaluations, or sit with a mentee, or make love.

paths to being awake as we live our life, to waking up to the richness of our life just the way it is, to noticing that existence itself is amazing. In the movie *Joe and the Volcano*, Joe says, “99 percent of us are asleep, and the rest are amazed.”

Think how the academic or work world would evolve if it reflected the collective mindfulness of us all, instead of our busy, judgmental thoughts. Think how different today would be just for you if you were aware of yourself within the day, then think who in your world would be affected if you were mindful and aware of their presence. Think how work would change if you took a few moments now and then to recall yourself to the present moment, to your breath. Watch your shoulders relax and your breathing deepen. Think what would happen to your feelings about risk; they would just be seen as feelings and would go on their merry way. There is a place for mindfulness in managing risk in working and in living. Stop and tap into it, see what happens in and around you.

Let's conclude today by focused reflection on risk.

Think first of a personal or professional risk you are facing. Got it? Ok. Now, instead of thinking about risk, just quiet the mind. One quick way to do this is to concentrate on counting out 10 deep breaths. Breathe in for five counts, breathe out for six. Do that 10 times. Bring the risk back into mind. What do you notice?

Any answer is okay. Maybe you couldn't forget the risk you are facing. The only question is: did you continuously come back to the counting the breaths as soon as you realized you were thinking or feeling or making judgments. How did that go?

Finally, think of risks your students face in coming back to college, in their first meeting with you, in developing a degree plan. Also think of the risks of life in your center. How could you use reflective silence in addressing agency and personal risk management in these situations?

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The only significant method is the method of the mind as it reaches out and assimilates. Subject-matter is but spiritual food, possible nutritive material. It cannot digest itself; it cannot of its own accord turn into bone and muscle and blood. The source of whatever is dead, mechanical and formal in schools is found precisely in the subordination of the life and experience of the child to the curriculum.

– John Dewey. *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902)

Thoughts on Credit by Evaluation

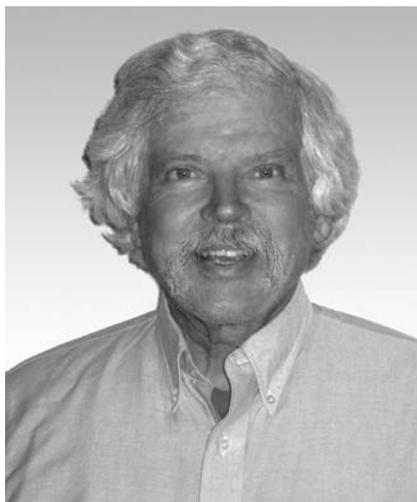
David Porter, Professor Emeritus, Hudson Valley Center

For two decades before retiring from full-time Empire State College mentoring in 2004, and on through the present, I've been deeply involved in numerous land-use struggles in my upstate town of New Paltz and the surrounding area. As co-chair of a 100+ grassroots membership organization dedicated to protecting the beautiful and valuable natural resources and attractive small-town community character of this area, I've participated in dozens of detailed critiques of local development proposals, attended and monitored and testified at a huge number of town board and planning board meetings, spent many hours researching through development files in municipal offices and writing the equivalent of several books of analyses of project impacts, from stormwater and wetlands to traffic and economic/fiscal issues, as well as drafts of legal briefs and motions for various lawsuits.

Beyond the opportunity for terrific bonding with others in common struggle and the sense of reward from serving community interests threatened by developmental greed and poor planning, my greatest satisfaction was in co-leading our community's successful battle against Wal-Mart, the #1 retailer in the world with an annual revenue higher than the GNP of all but 26 countries. Following that 1996 victory and to make its process and dynamics accessible to others, I took a three-month leave, most of a sabbatical and several additional years preparing a book, *Megamall on the Hudson*, with a local NYU law professor who provided pro bono legal leadership to our group throughout the struggle.

Researching the book and considering our experience with the environmental impact review process in a larger context in turn led to examining current participatory democratic theory and practice more generally. And this in turn came full circle to re-unite with my decades-long ongoing concerns with workplace democracy and

anarchism stemming from doctoral research in Algeria of the mid-60s, experiments in the 60s and 70s with radical pedagogy, and my research and book on Emma Goldman and the Spanish Revolution (1983, 2006).



David Porter

Does such a narrative sound familiar? Of course, if your Empire State College mentoring has led you through endless numbers of degree program and credit by evaluation (CBE) essays from hundreds of students over the years. Not only is there a clear discernible line of personal interest and commitment separate from any academic expectation or reward; there also is an interesting array of learnings across a good variety of fields. How much prior formal academic preparation did I have in traffic analysis, economic market studies, environmental impact review processes, community organizing, legal skills and even local politics? Nada, zilch, rien de rien. Did my "informal curriculum" in such areas match the formal courses I'd attend in a university setting? Yes and no, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on my pragmatic needs to know.

Here, then, is the obvious connection with Empire State College and its process

of student degree program planning and prior learning evaluation – a frequent conversation in my own mind while mentoring students and actively participating in the community at the same time. Apart from expanding my own base of competence to evaluate large numbers of students in areas of community organizing, local politics and environmental issues, I often imagined myself going through the same process on the other side of the table.

This raised other issues beyond the pragmatic mechanics of amassing my own CBEs and assembling a degree program of my own. What it provoked in my mind was reflection on both the bureaucratic and creative dimensions of this activity.

There is nothing more bureaucratic and artificial than arbitrarily packaging various bounded areas of knowledge and assigning to each certain credit points redeemable toward an eventual paper credential of "worthy learnedness." This "normalization" and "legitimization" of learnings is what the college does with its CBE practice, but this also is what all "higher learning" institutions do as they formalize curricula, credit hours and graduation requirements. This bureaucratization of learning, of course, is part of a long-range historical process from organic maintenance and evolution of traditional culture to the emergence of formal schooling, universities, disciplines, credentialization, etc. The arbitrariness of the practice was especially explicit when students told us that other SUNY campuses refused to evaluate certain prior learnings simply because "they don't match" with their own guarded turfs of specific course packages. Genuine learning thus was devalued for apparent reasons of institutional finances and vanity, along with professorial insecurity and bias.

The creative dimension of the CBE process is so much of what I recall as the "heart and soul" of Empire State College in the years I served as a mentor. In the best of

experiences, the creative self-reflectiveness of students as they discovered and articulated their own mini-autobiographies of learning was matched by our mentor excitement and creative encouragement to plow wider and deeper and to map the learning landscape for further meaningful exploration. For some, of course, CBEs meant primarily savings in time and money, a not unworthy consideration of its own. Others continued to see it as primarily a mechanical exercise, perhaps no more exciting than the process of simply attaining an eventual paper credential allowing access to a job they knew they already deserved.

In the end, as we know, it was the learnings themselves which were significant – some far more than others – not their ease of packaging for college credit through CBE

translations. The qualitative experience of creativity involved, critical abilities expanded, connectedness with other realms of knowledge, genuine empowerment gained for individual and community liberation – these are the meaningful measures of learning, I believe, whether acknowledged or not by CBEs or traditional campus curricula. And these are the measures by which I evaluate my own learnings in local environmental activism.

I know that increasing bureaucratization and workload insidiously eroded the opportunity and expectation for consistent high quality learning over the nearly three decades I taught at Empire State College. But when it happened, despite artificial impediments, it continued to energize and gratify mentors and students alike.

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Do I have the right to facilitate your critical reflection? What kinds of contract between learner and facilitator would allow me to take on this role for you? Are we, under the guise of emancipatory education, in danger of imposing a set of values and expectations on learners which is just as oppressive as the teacher-centered regime from which many of us have been trying to escape?

– David Boud, “Reflecting on Reflection” in *Perspectives on Experiential Learning* (Morris Keeton, editor, International Experiential Learning Conference, Washington D.C. 1994)

Essential Elements of PLA Programs: Institutional Perspectives

In response to our inquiry, colleagues from a number of institutions in which prior learning assessment (PLA) or recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a regular program feature offered their thoughts on our question: Can you identify and briefly discuss what you believe to be the essential elements of any PLA program? From your point of view, what does any program have to include?

Thanks to contributors, and to Nan Travers for her suggestions about this opportunity to gain some insight into ideas and practices from colleagues outside of Empire State College.

Gabrielle Dietzel, Coordinator of Assessment Services, Vermont State Colleges, Montpelier, Vermont

Assessment of prior learning at the Vermont State Colleges can be one of the core experiences for adult students returning to or entering college. We believe that learning is an ongoing, life-long activity, and that the source of learning, be it in a classroom, in the community or on the job, is secondary to the learning itself. We consider prior learning assessment an important link between an adult student's prior learning and his or her future educational goals. We also believe that education is an empowering experience and that prior learning assessment plays an important role in gaining self-confidence and control over one's life and future.

It is essential that everyone involved in the process recognizes and agrees that credit is awarded for learning through experience, not for the experience itself, and that the most important elements of a student's request for credit through a portfolio are the articulation and documentation of that learning.

Practices we consider essential:

- Students are offered a well-defined process for developing a portfolio via enrollment in a credit-bearing course, taught by a specially trained faculty member, and are supported by program staff.
- Student portfolios are reviewed by a knowledgeable and appropriate group of faculty and generalists from a variety of colleges and universities, and credit is awarded by the consensus of this group, based on CAEL standards.
- Awarded credits are reflected on a separate transcript, which the student can then take to a school of his or her choice.
- The portfolio evaluation process and criteria are clear and transparent.
- Students receive feedback on credits not awarded.

Henriette Pranger, Eastern Connecticut State University, School of Continuing Education, Willimantic, Connecticut

At the heart of our work is flexibility and an openness to different forms of how learning is presented and evaluated.

Also critical are:

- Opportunities for ongoing discussions between an advisor/teacher/peers that help students to: (1) discover the connections between their personal learning and related college curriculum/outcomes. (Students need to be able to translate their learning into the language and format valued by the university; there needs to be a liaison/student advocate who assists with the process.) (2) harvest the learning from their experience, because the context

is critical and interwoven. (Because they have been so busy, often it is the process of creating the portfolio that actually gives students the time to reflect on their learning and articulate what they learned. Students may not have had to think about and explain it aloud before.)

- Resources that support student research into the curriculum (e.g., online program and course outcomes, access to department faculty willing to discuss what they teach and what students are learning).
- Portfolios that provide students with an opportunity to tell their stories, exhibit their work and discuss what skill or knowledge areas it demonstrates. An openness to giving students a variety of ways to describe and document their learning (whether in written form, through a discussion or through visual media).
- Access to examples of past portfolios, to students who have completed the process, and to written materials that describe the process, specific tasks and timelines, etc.
- Feedback from the evaluators in addition to the college credit that they deserve.
- Individual support with writing and technology requirements on a one-on-one basis or in small groups.

Carleen M. Baily, Prior Learning Assessment Specialist, Thomas Edison State College, Trenton, New Jersey

Prior learning assessment (PLA) at Thomas Edison State College is a course-based program that allows adult students to draw upon life experience as the basis for earning college-level credit. Developed using a

course-challenge model, students attempt to match their life experience to a specific course description. In order to maximize each student's opportunity to correlate his or her experience with a college-level course, the college provides a searchable database of approximately 9,000 course descriptions, known as the Prior Learning Assessment Course Description Database. To earn credits through PLA, the student registers with a mentor who guides the student through a demonstration of mastery of his or her college-level learning; that is, the student needs to provide evidence of the knowledge that the student would have gained had the student enrolled in a traditional course. To do so, students are expected to address five to seven course objectives through a written narrative with supporting evidence. Because earning credit through prior learning assessment depends on already-acquired knowledge and skills, PLA is not independent study and mentors are not expected to "teach" the material.

Prior learning assessment credit is earned on a pass/fail basis; that is, with credit granted for "C-level" work or better. A core belief is that credit is granted, not for experience, but for the learning that comes through that experience. While mentors serve as guides throughout this process, students, as adults, are expected to work independently and responsibly.

The college's PLA program serves degree-seeking students as well as those from outside the college who wish to transfer PLA credit to their home institutions or use the credit for professional advancement.

Thus, at the core of our PLA work at Thomas Edison State College is the belief that:

- Students have gained relevant college-level knowledge that deserves to be acknowledged.
- Courses at other accredited institutions can serve as a basis for determining if a student's knowledge or skills deserves to be considered creditable.
- Students need guidance from mentors in developing electronic portfolios that demonstrate mastery of their college-level knowledge.

Maryanne R. LeGrow, Assessment Coordinator, Charter Oak State College, New Britain, Connecticut

These are the essential elements of any PLA program.

Program policies and procedures must supply:

- Clearly defined structural requirements of the portfolio.
- Clearly defined content requirements of the portfolio.
- Easily accessible support for student technical and organizational needs.
- Emotional and content support in the form of timely response, copious feedback, accurate and frequent communication by program personnel.

Assessment procedures must:

- Establish that whatever the student's experience, it has been broad enough, deep enough, and of sufficient duration that it could have produced the knowledge that is claimed.
- Require the student to have articulated a knowledge of theory appropriate to the level and content of courses for which credit is awarded.
- Mandate both articulation of content knowledge and presentation of documentation supporting the student's claim to have learned and applied that knowledge.
- Provide means of validating the authenticity of student experience and documentation.
- Award credit in a format that can be understood and accepted by other institutions (e.g., block credit may meet graduation requirements at the home institution but may not allow a registrar at another institution to determine whether the credit meets admission prerequisites for a graduate program).

Ruksana Osman, WITS School of Education, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

In South Africa, my experience as a recognition of prior learning (RPL) researcher and practitioner has taught me that the essential principle in any RPL program is to accept that RPL or PLA is a hybrid practice. This holds true irrespective of where the program is located – geographically, institutionally and theoretically. So what do I mean by hybrid practice? It is a practice that allows for negotiated responses to RPL, responses that honor the university and the student alike. Such a "hybridist" principle is cognizant of RPL as a complex and dynamic process with strong roots in justice and fairness. The principle of hybridity in practice means that different models and approaches to RPL can prevail in the same institution, and that in real life settings, divergent interpretations of RPL are possible and desirable.

After all, RPL in practice raises personal questions for those who implement it and for those who receive it – questions about themselves as raced, gendered and classed actors.

Different academics have responded to these personal questions in varied ways, which has resulted in contending versions of RPL propelled by different philosophical orientations. In the final analysis, what lies at the heart of a program is this hybridist principle and practice, which makes space for us as RPL researchers and practitioners to critique conventional ideas about knowledge and experience.

The Mind-Scrubbers

Robert Congemi, Northeast Center

My name is Peter Ross, and I am not, emphatically, a nice man – at least, that is what some people say, and, to be honest, I should add, this is what I think about myself at times. There are several possibilities, I suppose, as to why I am so unpleasant. I have discussed them with various people in my life, particularly with my girlfriend Regina and with my shrink, Dr. Farb, and they think it has to do with the kind of life I lead (Regina) or my viewpoint (Farb). Regina says, for instance, that by working for the city administration I feel I am not successful enough in life, or that being in my 40s I am going through a phase, or that I had the very bad luck of losing my mother at an early age.

“You say yourself, Peter, that you are always upset, always complaining, always angry,” Regina reminded me the other day as we sat on the steps of City Hall, starting, I guess, my recent big trouble. It was lunch time, and we wanted to enjoy fresh air and the sudden sunshine of May. Regina is a very pretty woman, and really quite reasonable, who also works for the mayor, in his secretarial pool.

“That’s got to be because of your life in general – to feel so strongly.”

I didn’t buy it for a minute.

“No, Regina. I won’t blame it on myself.”

Regina pouted, which made her look more sexy than she usually is.

“It is *not* me. I swear there is good cause, which has nothing to do with me. My god, Regina,” I started in. “We live in a world that’s gone absolutely mad. Nobody does any thinking for themselves, or if they do, it is only what they’ve been told to think – by the mind-scrubbers.”

At this, Regina groaned a little and rolled her eyes, modestly enough, but I wonder if she finally has had her fill of me, and if our relationship will not last much longer.

“The mind-scrubbers, Peter? Who are the mind-scrubbers? This is the first time I’ve heard that one. Is this going to be a conspiracy theory?”

“Who are the mind-scrubbers? Why they’re all around us. Everywhere.”

Regina made a face.

“You think I’m kidding? Well, I’m not. Let’s start with television, for instance. Whenever I’m in a rash mood and turn the damn thing on, what do I get? I get ads that tell us if we buy this automobile or that deodorant, we’ll be happy in life. That’s right – happy in life. On every channel, day in and day out. Bathroom cleaners, fabric softeners, peppermint gum – ”

“Peter ... ”

“Advertisements designed to scrub our minds away – ”

“Peter, you’re being silly. You’re overdoing it.”

“Oh, am I?” I wondered if I was getting red in the face. “You don’t think people believe this endless nonsense?”

“No, I don’t think they do, at least, not as much as you’re making out. After all, everyone knows about advertising.”

I felt like I wanted to jump up and start walking about, back and forth, fast.

“Well, then, who needs to talk about advertising, Regina? You want to talk about more ‘serious’ subject matter? What about these biographies that they’re featuring now? Have you seen them recently?”

“ ... I guess.”

“I sit there sometimes, like a fool, watching and listening to these pieces of video claptrap that make actors and rock stars, politicians and CEOs, into god-like creatures, American *icons*, for god’s sakes. When the truth of the matter is that these people are actually egomaniacs or drug

addicts, or rapacious, garden-variety robber barons.”

“Peter ... ”

“Or if their actual characters are admitted, we’re told that we’re supposed to be sympathetic towards them, to be understanding, and be terribly impressed that they have overcome their bad behavior. We are to be proud of them, praise them for overcoming their shocking egoism or addiction or money madness, now that they are on the advice of their handlers, donating a little bit of their money to good causes.” I tried to catch my breath. “Mind-scrubbing. Mind-scrubbing, Regina, all of it. I’m not fooled.”

“You’re really serious, aren’t you, Peter?”

“You bet I am. And as far as I’m concerned, it’s even worse.”

“Good god, what else?”

“I think the mind-scrubbing is virtually everywhere. It’s part of our culture, or has become part of our culture – I haven’t figured it all out yet. *Everybody* does it. And I’m not just talking about ordinary people putting their spin on things, the best spin they can on things from time to time. That’s okay, that’s just human nature. We just want to feel a little good about ourselves, or we don’t want to go stark raving mad over reality or the reality of our lives. I can understand that. Hell, I do that. We can’t every minute of our lives concede that we’re ugly or dull-witted or have made simply disastrous mistakes. But what I’m talking about, Regina, is the general cynicism among people who know better, who know exactly what they’re doing, who know that they are being about as disingenuous, as exploitative as they can be. They are on the move, they are the movers and shakers, the ones who would be winners at all costs, the aggressive, me-first souls who are defining our society, who are turning us all, all of us, by their example or out of necessity, into a

society of hustlers and hucksters, hustling and huckstering each other ... ”

Regina sighed deeply.

“ ... a whole damned society of people scrubbing and scrubbing away at each others brains!”

I stopped. Spent, I guess.

Regina looked at me, sadly, real sorry for me, and very worried. She stood up, gathering her pocketbook and lunch things together.

“I don’t know what to say, Peter,” she told me.

I studied her face. “Do you agree with me?”

“I ... I ... don’t know. You make everything all sound so terrible.”

“ ... Yes. I know. I think that’s fair to say. Don’t you think I’m right?”

“I don’t know, Peter. I don’t know.” Regina stood up, and I thought to myself that I would not like very much losing her.

“Actually, the only thing I’m sure about is that I’m worried about you, Peter. Worried for you.” She studied me closely. “You really feel this way? I mean, do you really believe everything you just said?”

“I think I do. Yes.”

“Terrific,” she said, softly, shaking her head, and walking away from me.

When Regina had gone, I went back to work at City Hall, up into the converted attic of the building, where my desk was, more than a little shaky, I had to admit. Sylvie, my co-worker on special events, was on the telephone, continuing to make arrangements for the annual cultural festival coming up in two months. When she got off the phone, she asked me about my lunch.

“I think I got a little too emotional,” I told her. “Regina walked away from me.”

Sylvie was in her 50s, and had worked for the administration for a number of years longer than I had. “Really, Peter, you got a little emotional?” she asked me, having some fun.

“Yes,” I said, trying to go along with her. “Sometimes, I can be a little difficult to take, you know.”

“Hmmm?” Sylvie grinned. “I hadn’t noticed.”

I smiled, not greatly amused.

Suddenly, Sylvie grew serious. “Well, let me give you something else to think about, darling. While you were gone, I got some gossip from downstairs.”

“What kind of gossip?”

“Hold on to your hat, Peter. The mayor is already starting to gear up for his re-election, and once again he’ll want us all to work on his campaign for him.”

I cringed. “God, is it that time again?”

“It is, my dear. You know the routine. He’ll be wanting us to make phone calls, stuff envelopes, strong-arm people ... ”

I started to breathe deeply.

“All for the cause, you know. His cause.”

“Sylvie, I just work for the City, that’s all,” I said to her. “I’m a crummy worker-bee. I help to make arrangements for community events.”

“You work for the mayor, Peter.”

I was silent.

“I just wish ... ”

“You just wish what?” Sylvie asked me.

“You wish you could work for someone better than the mayor? It bothers you that you are part of his plan to make his career triumphant in local, and then state, politics?”

“Sylvie,” I protested.

“Why, Peter? What’s the matter? The mayor’s only following in his daddy’s footsteps. It’s all been planned. Long ago. Probably when you were still a little kid.”

“I think you’re cruel.”

“Oh, it gets better. Much better.”

“Now what?” I started to stiffen.

“Peter ... ” Sylvie’s voice was very serious now, even cautious. “I’ve heard that he’s even thinking of making anybody who works for him register in the party. If you plan to work for him, and you’re not in the party, you lose your job.”

“Dear God.”

“Yes. He may very well mean it. If you’re not in the party, you lose your job.”

“But ... but, Sylvie,” I sputtered. “I can’t do that. I just can’t do that. I can’t join the party. I can help to make cultural events happen. *But I can’t join the party.* Dear God, I just can’t be part of these people. They are not my friends, not my brothers, not my group, whatever you want to call it. We have *nothing* in common.”

“Well, sweet stuff,” Sylvie said, also, like Regina, looking at me concerned, worried. “Then you may very well have to find another line of work. Won’t you? And is that what you really want, Peter?”

For the next few weeks, after this delightful little revelation by Sylvie, I found myself playing a rather debilitating, delightful, little game with myself. On the one hand of course, I thought about nothing else than the real possibility that I would have to lose my job, my work, my livelihood. But, on the other, I completely denied the approaching reality and didn’t think about it at all. I made no plans, no contingencies. I simply went about my business as if nothing would ever really happen, dumbly, in shock, totally paralyzed, I suppose.

One evening, my sister Dorothy phoned and asked if I would come to a party she was having for family and friends to meet my niece’s – her daughter’s – fiancé. At first, I didn’t want to go. As you can well imagine by now, I’m not exactly the quintessential house-party type. People are usually smart enough to leave my name off a list of guests happy to sit around and chit-chat, holding drinks and devouring munchies. Besides, I’d never had that much in common with my niece, who understandably was far more interested in Bergdorf-Goodman’s, if the truth be told, than she was in a strange, ratty, little uncle. But my sister was very insistent.

“Peter, you never accept any invitations. Do you ever go anywhere? Do you have a life?”

“ ... well, Dorothy, I ... I do date Regina ... ,” I reminded her.

“Yes, but I want you to meet Candy’s Kyle and his family. You must do this for me. I very much want all **my** family to meet all **his** family, right up front. You can understand

that, can't you? I want everything to go completely perfectly for Candy."

I thought of my niece Candace, and couldn't imagine life not going "completely perfectly" for her. She was 22, a beautiful blond girl – there was no arguing the point – and already well-placed in her father's business. My brother-in-law's firm was the largest kitchen cabinet manufacturer in the state.

"Peter, you must do this for me. You're the only sibling I've got. I don't ask you much."

There was no getting out of it. "All right. All right, Dorothy," I told her. "I'll ... come."

When I hung up the phone, I told myself that perhaps the house party would be something of a diversion for me at this particular moment in my life.

That Friday evening Regina and I got into Regina's car – I don't own one myself – and drove outside of town to where my sister lived, in a really quite exclusive neighborhood. We drove around lots of hilly circles of roads, passing one huge and extravagant home after another, desperately following the directions my sister had given me, since it had been so long since I'd last visited her. Finally, we made a sharp turn, I recognized my sister's house, and Regina parked the car at the end of a long line of other guests' cars. Getting out of the car, Regina and I looked at each other. Even though it was dark, we could see enough of Dorothy's house to be duly impressed. The house was a big, brick, Georgian affair, a very broad, three-story structure that seemed to move out from its center to wing after wing. As we walked up the driveway, Regina suddenly gave my hand a little squeeze, as if she were trying to comfort me.

Inside, the house, which consisted of airy rooms opening onto each other, was very crowded with guests. It was clear they were virtually all bright, well-off, good-looking people, going busily – successfully – about their lives. I scanned the room to locate my sister, or her husband or her daughter, and after a few moments saw the three at the far end of the room I was in, very animated, happily chatting. Regina asked if we should make our way across the room and let my sister know that we had arrived, but I declined.

"Oh, she'll catch up to us sooner or later," I told Regina. "Besides, I suspect she already quite well knows that we are here."

Just then I felt someone take me by the arm and, turning, a bit surprised, I saw my brother-in-law, Harold, a big, hairy, brown-haired man, a man obviously satisfied with his position in life.

"Peter," he said, in his booming voice, seeming to be very pleased. "Dorothy did manage to get you here. Good. Good."

Harold looked at Regina, and I introduced them.

"May I get you two a drink? Has someone offered you anything to eat yet? The hors-d'oeuvres are fantastic, the best money can buy, I can tell you ..."

Harold caught sight of a couple seated on a divan, just a few feet back and to one side of us. "And can I introduce you to the Donaldsons?" Harold made his next remark for the Donaldsons as well. "Peter, the Donaldsons are two of best people I know. All the way from Texas. Their home's in Dallas, or Fort Worth, or something like that. 'Tex' sells my cabinets there."

Harold moved us to them.

"Hello, 'Tex.' Hello, Betty Jean," he said. "Let me introduce you to my brother-in-law and his friend."

The Donaldsons rose, and we shook hands. Betty Donaldson giggled. She was a skinny, edgy woman in her 50s. "Oh, Harold, we're from Dallas, Harold. You know that."

"Of course. Of course, I know that, Betty," Harold said, taking her by the arm. "I was just teasing you."

Already, Harold was starting to look away. Someone or something else had caught his attention.

"Well, my friends," he said to the four of us. "Now that I've introduced you, let me leave you people to all get to know one another. And remember, if you need anything – food, drinks, whatever – just let me know."

To my horror, the Donaldsons almost immediately began talking about themselves and Texas. Betty Jean Donaldson said that she had originally been from Fort Worth, but had lived all of her adult life in Dallas.

"Though if I had to choose between Fort Worth and Dallas," Betty Jean explained, "I'd live in Dallas."

"Of course you'd live in Dallas," her husband 'Tex' said. He was well over six-foot, lean, a little stooped over. "That's where all your stuff is, Betty Jean. Where your home and kids and friends are."

Betty Jean giggled again, after considering what 'Tex' had pointed out.

Then 'Tex' turned to me. "Though I tell you, Pete, it doesn't really matter. Any place in Texas is great. I know you think I'm prejudiced when I say this, but Texas is the greatest place on earth." 'Tex' leaned toward me, his arm on the arm rest of the divan. "We've got some real big things there. Big, big oil fields. Big companies. Big people. Hell, we've got the biggest people I know. Good people. Down home people. Country people, but real big people. You know what I mean, Pete?"

I wasn't sure what to answer. Betty Jean spoke up again, talking, it seemed to me, mostly to her husband.

"But it really isn't just good people in Texas, 'Tex.' It's special people. Extra special. Do you have people like that in this part of the country, Mr. Roth? Miss Regina? Extra special people?"

As Betty Jean Donaldson spoke, my attention – I suppose, to my shame – began to wander. Glancing around the room, which now was filled more than ever with people, prosperous and self-assured, I noticed my sister with her daughter and a young man I took to be Candy's soon-to-be fiancé. They seemed getting ready to speak to everyone, and sure enough a few moments later Dorothy was tapping on a wine glass, wanting the attention of people in the room and the surrounding rooms. She held a wireless microphone in her hand and spoke into it. I wondered if she had had too much to drink.

"Hello, hello," my sister cooed, laughing softly, looking around her. "I'd like to make an announcement. Actually, I'd like to introduce you all to someone you already know ... my daughter Candy."

People began to break off their conversations and turn towards Dorothy.

“As you know, I’ve invited you all here tonight to meet someone very important in Candy’s life these days.”

Dorothy looked fondly at the two young people, and then back to her audience.

“But I want Candy to do the talking,” my sister said, just the slightest bit tipsy. “Candy? Candy?”

Candy, who had been whispering to another young woman standing near her, turned to her mother.

“Yes, Mom?”

“Candy, I’d like you to tell all these nice people out here about Kyle.”

“Oh ... okay.”

Reaching out, Candy took her fiancé by the hand, smiled broadly at everyone now facing her, and began.

“Well, the first thing I want to say is, this handsome man next to me is Kyle Farnan, and ...” Candy paused deliberately, and then rushed ahead. “... he’s just the greatest guy around.”

Dorothy began to clap, and others followed her lead, a little unsure, but willing to go along with her.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Candy continued. “I’m proud to tell you Kyle already has his B.S. degree, and a master’s from The Wharton School.” Now she clapped. “And ... and, at his firm, he’s already making policy decisions!” She clapped a second time, and somewhat uncertain again, people followed her lead.

“How about that?” Candy asked, smiling proudly. Then she switched to a comic conspiratorial tone. “And the best thing about him is ... he does what I tell him to! How about *that*?”

People laughed.

“Only kidding, only kidding,” Candy said, laughing, too.

Seeming to enjoy Candy’s joke, Kyle Farnan took the microphone from her. He was a tall, real handsome fellow, I had to give him that, clearly a well brought up young man by very doting parents. It was obvious that he had not been ill-treated by life in any

way, so far, and that the future would be a wonderful time for him.

“Is it my turn?” he asked his audience, grinning, confident. “No, seriously, folks ... the person who is the really greatest around here is ... ol’ Candy herself.” Kyle made like a master-of-ceremonies at a beauty contest. “Check her out ... drop-dead beautiful, always in the latest styles, already on her way at her father’s company, shaping up the human resources management program there. Can you believe it? See what I mean? The one to applaud, folks, is surely not me, but our little Candy.” And Kyle started to clap.

When all this was over, people went back to partying, nibbling their hors d’oeuvres and finger food, sipping their drinks. After a few minutes, I glanced over at Regina to see if I could find anything in her demeanor to suggest that perhaps we could leave early. She looked at me carefully noncommittal, maybe a bit apprehensive.

Suddenly, my sister was beside us, or, rather, above us as we sat on her couch, with Candy and Kyle Farnan in tow. She seemed very pleased, and pleased with herself. She had a drink in her hand now, and I could see ol’ Dorothy was indeed on her way to getting drunk.

“Well, hot stuff,” she said to me, for starters, amused rather than belligerent – at least, for the moment. “I see you deigned to show up after all.”

I didn’t saying anything to this.

“Well, what do you think? We’re not so bad, are we?”

I still didn’t say anything.

My sister backed off a little, and addressed everyone, holding up her drink. “Actually, if I do say so myself, I think we’re pretty good.”

She looked at me, wondering how come I had not yet taken the bait.

“Don’t you think so, Peter? When you look around, couldn’t you really call us the hoipolloi? And don’t you think these two kids here are where the action is?”

“They sure are,” I said, dryly, finally.

“Where our future lays?”

I struggled not to lose control, despite myself.

“You bet ... just where the future lies.”

“Where the future is in good hands?”

But slowly, I started to come apart.

“Absolutely. In great hands, Sis.”

Dorothy saw she had a little something at last.

“I’m so glad you agree.” She addressed the room, and raised her glass. “My little brother the genius agrees everyone.”

With that, I couldn’t hold on.

“Under a little duress,” I muttered.

She jumped. “What’s that?”

“Under a little duress,” I said louder.

To my astonishment, Dorothy suddenly seemed murderous. How much must I have angered her over time.

“Just what do you mean, Peter?”

I sighed, looked at Regina, who was at once alarmed and displeased. Then I let go completely.

“I mean, Dorothy, that you’ve got to be kidding.” I repeated myself, to my sorrow. “You’ve just got to be kidding. If all this is the future, if this scene here is the future ... I’d have to shoot myself.”

Stricken, probably pretty amazed by just how far I’d go, Dorothy recoiled. “You bastard, Peter,” she said to me. “You bastard. You really are a bastard, you know?”

“Thanks,” I told my sister.

On the way home, Regina would hardly talk to me. I had been afraid of that from the moment I lost control at my sister’s. I asked her if I weren’t justified to have said what I did, but she only shook her head and looked at me as if she couldn’t understand how I could be the way I was. I pleaded with her not to be angry with me.

“I’m not angry with you, Peter,” she said, coldly.

The next day I tried to be in touch with Regina by phone. I tried not to think of what had happened after what I told my sister. Dorothy had become even more

furious with me, and a few other people had said things to me as well. The Donaldsons seemed horrified, and Howard, I think, seriously considered taking a swing at me. In the end, Dorothy told me that the more she thought about it, the more she would be happy probably never to see me again, at least not for a long time. She said she thought I was truly nuts. No matter how many times I tried, I could not get Regina on the phone, and by the end of the day I started to panic and thought that Regina wasn't going to have me in her life anymore, either. I even thought of going over to where she worked and asking her if our relationship was over. But I resisted doing that, as hard as resisting was. After all, a big hint is a big hint.

For the next few days, mostly what I could think of was to go over again and again what I was doing, what I was feeling. Maybe I was wrong, maybe I was taking the wrong view of everything. Maybe the world wasn't crazy, maybe it was me. Except for work, I stayed in my apartment and tried to figure things out, or at night walked around the streets when I could no longer stand being alone in my apartment. Because I lived in the city, and not in the suburbs like most of the people I knew and worked with, I took to walking down the hill where my apartment house is all the way to the river, and back up again, talking to myself.

By the end of the week, on top of everything else, and particularly with what might be going on with my job, I found myself – where God knows I had been before – as jumpy as a cat. I existed in this strange state where I looked out on the world, looked out on other people and wondered how they could be going about their business, how they could be happy, normal, how they could be thinking of me as normal, when secretly I was so scared that my world was just about out of control.

“How can you be treating me as if nothing were wrong?” I wanted to say to everyone. “Though thank God, you are. Thank God for something. It calms me down, I guess. But, the truth is I am **not** all right. I can't get the world to stop moving – or what I mean is, I can't get myself to stabilize, to stop shaking. I may have to go to Dr. Farb again, and I don't want to do that.”

One look at Sylvie's face when I got to work on Friday made it clear I was in for more trouble. But before I could ask her exactly what was going on, she turned and pointed to the television set we kept in the office to monitor the media coverage of our special events. Our boss, his Honor Mayor Hugh Williams, of course a presidential-looking man of about 40, was on the TV. The camera was up close on him, and his head filled the television screen.

“He's announcing his candidacy,” Sylvie told me.

I leaned against my desk and listened to the mayor. The look on his face was very serious, sincere and intense.

“My friends,” he was saying. “My friends, I have announced my candidacy to once again be your mayor because it is very important that I do so. This candidacy is not about me. It's about you. It's important that I continue the good work that I began for you nearly four years ago.”

Mayor Williams paused for emphasis, contracted his brow a bit to exhibit his concern, and went on.

“Let me take this time to tell you about it. First, it was honest. My administration has been an honest administration, for I believe honesty is indeed the best policy. If you're honest, everything else will follow along.” The mayor paused again, and then went on again. “Second, my track record is clear. It is not hard to see that my administration has had energy. From the first day, it has had energy. No, not energy, more than energy. I would call it spirit. Yes, that's it – spirit. A kind of energy plus. And I know you have seen this energy in everything I and my people have done. The record is clear.”

Sylvie glanced back at me.

“Third,” the mayor said, moving on. “As you all know, as you all can clearly see, even my opponents, my administration has had vision. *Vision*. That's what has really set it apart from other administrations. Mere politicians have their agenda, their little plans that benefit their own personal careers and the welfare of their cronies. But I, Hugh Williams, a true friend of the people, *all* of the people, know where I want to go, where I want to lead this city. I'm thinking as a leader of the new millennium, not looking

backward, but keen to the challenges of a new age, ready to accept the challenges of a new age, ready to seize the day that is upon us!”

The mayor stopped, visibly moved by his intensity and passion, as if he had been to the mountain top, and then his face relaxed and he smiled, a smile of great, apparent love. He took a deep breath, readied himself for the next phase of his announcement speech, and began.

“Now let me share with you, my friends, my thoughts on the kind of program my opponents will soon, I know – it is inevitable – will soon unfairly present to you ... ”

“Turn it off, Sylvie, please,” I asked her. I think I was shaking, and I think Sylvie noticed, for she dutifully left her desk, walked to the television set rather quietly and did indeed turn it off. Then she turned to me.

“Peter, he wants everyone to have signed on with the party by the close of the working day today. It's all been arranged. You must be a party member by five o'clock. I was given a list of personnel they know are not members. At least, not yet. You, of course, are on the list. You're supposed to go over to headquarters between three and five and join up. They're very serious, Peter. It has to happen. And today.”

“What?” It was as if I didn't understand.

“You have to join the party. Today. This afternoon.”

I sat down, behind my desk. “That can't be, Sylvie.”

Sylvie's voice was quiet. “Yes, it can, Peter. It most certainly can.”

“But I'm not going to do it. I can't do it.”

“You have to, Peter.”

I looked around the room, the room where I had worked for 10 years – Sylvie's desk and papers, my desk and papers, the ceiling arching down on two sides, because, as I said earlier, we really were in the attic of the City Hall building. The television set mounted on the wall, our computers, the reference books on my desk, the Impressionist magazine reproductions

scotch-taped on the walls – now suddenly all old friends, comforters, essentials to my sanity. I stood up.

“Is there no way around it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“There must be.”

Sylvie didn’t speak further.

“I can’t do it, Sylvie,” I told her, and left the room.

Downstairs, I found a phone booth, feeling oddly separated from the old man there who acted as a guard, from the few visitors crossing the marble of the first floor, from the young interns chatting near the information booth.

“Hello? Dr. Farb, please?”

It was his receptionist’s voice, Phyllis, already on guard. “Who is this?”

“I want to speak to Dr. Farb. Is he there?”

Phyllis was tough. “Who is this please? Are you one of Dr. Farb’s patients? Would you like to make an appointment, sir?”

“Is he there?”

“What is your name, sir?”

“Is he there?” I nearly whimpered. “Please, tell me if he’s there.”

Leaving City Hall, I caught a bus uptown to where Dr. Farb had his office. When I got to his building, I could see Phyllis at her receptionist’s desk, behind the wall with the little window cut into it, designed I suddenly realized, for safety and protection against distraught clients. Looking up from some forms she was working with as I came up to the window, Phyllis stared at me, smiling routinely, but perhaps a bit confused.

“Oh ... Mr. Ross.” She furrowed her brow. “Did you by any chance call Dr. Farb earlier? About half an hour ago?”

Somebody called, and after thinking about it, I thought it was you.”

Several feet behind her and off to the far side of the area was Farb himself, standing, reading a chart. He, too, looked up, very curious.

I ignored Phyllis. “Dr. Farb? Dr. Farb? I have to see you. Now. Please.”

Phyllis and Farb glanced at each other.

“Please.”

Slowly, Farb nodded to Phyllis, and then addressed me. “What is the matter, Peter?”

“I have to see you.”

“I **do** have clients, Peter.”

“Let me talk to you. Just for a few minutes.”

Farb thought for a long while. Phyllis watched his face as attentively as I did.

“Alright,” he said, finally, and then spoke to Phyllis.

“Phyllis, tell people I am with Mr. Ross.”

“... yes, sir.”

“And let Mr. Ross in.”

Phyllis pressed a button that unlocked the door to the rest of the facility.

“Come into my office, Peter. A few minutes.”

I followed him down the hall, into his office, a place I knew well.

Farb sat down in a leather chair near a coffee table and motioned for me to sit in another one. I couldn’t sit. I stood, and Farb prepared to take notes.

“What is the trouble, Peter? Why must you see me now?”

Farb seemed wary. Not that I blamed him. “Is it the usual?” Did he seem annoyed with me, bored?

I looked at him, and realized I was trying to catch my breath. It must have seemed pitiful to him.

“I ... I ... it is ... the usual. Yes, the usual.” My life captured in his banal word. “Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Peter, we’ve talked about this several times now. You’ve got to come to terms with it.”

“I know that, doctor. God, I know that. Why do you think I’m here?”

He seemed very alert, caught somewhere between his superiority, his boredom, his safety.

I leaned forward and put my hands on the back of one of his expensive, leather chairs.

“You’ve *got* to understand, doctor. This isn’t the usual that I have to come to terms with. As weird as it seems, everywhere I go I see and hear this disgraceful scrubbing of minds. I know I’m wrong. Good God, I know I’m wrong, but everyone is hustling, pushing their point of view, their own ego needs, their own self-defenses, desires, agenda. The truth doesn’t matter. People just want to get on, with whatever it is that is important to them. They want to sell products, if they’re merely expedient or cynical, or create a vision about themselves, if they want to seem heroically good to their adoring society, or just be better positioned, if they’re like you and me – to be better liked, better respected, better in sync with what they believe about themselves. I can’t process it all, it’s so all around me. I try to ignore it. But there’s no ignoring it. I try to go about my business, *but one can’t ignore or avoid the world one exists in!*”

I tried to catch my breath, and not too much alarm him. “I don’t want to be unhappy. I don’t want to cause trouble, not for you, or Regina, or my sister, or myself. I want to be happy, Dr. Farb. I so much want to be happy. You wouldn’t believe it. I don’t want you to say, is it the usual, Peter?”

Dr. Farb looked at me, almost warily, I thought. Was he alarmed, afraid for himself? I tried to calm down, though I just couldn’t manage it. I tried to sit down in the chair I was holding onto, but I popped up out of it again.

“Peter,” Farb said, rather slowly, given the nature of our encounter at the moment, given the nature of me at the moment. “Have we ever talked about medication? Maybe that’s what we should do at this point. I didn’t want to bring it up, but now it seems to me that something may be appropriate. You know there are many very useful medications these days. They are really quite wonderful, I think it’s fair and even appropriate to say. There are so many people who they help function. So many people who don’t have to hurt any more, feel the kind of pain you feel. What do you think, Peter? Let me prescribe some medication for you at this point. I have thought that perhaps we could talk it out, that you could learn to come to terms with what upsets you so much. Remember how often we’ve spoken of your need to draw

boundaries, to have limits? I thought that was the way to advise you, but I think we should move on at this point. Shouldn't we?"

I stared at him, and grew even more upset, in the end even unfair to him. "What kind of a man are you, Dr. Farb? What would you have me do? We are dealing here with a fundamental problem of our society, aren't we? Is it me? Is it something to be dealt with by drugs? This is a matter of perceiving reality, not of soothing me. Someone has to say something, don't they? Though I am not the one, though I don't have the strength, somebody has to do something? Surely, that is so? I want you to help me. I want more than to be told to draw boundaries, whatever that means. I don't want to be given more drugs. Please, please, please, please ..."

As I went on, humiliating myself, disgorging the ontological poison in my system, I wondered if Dr. Farb weren't going to push a button somewhere and have a covey of white-uniformed men rush into the room to restrain me from causing the good doctor bodily harm.

"I can't help you, Peter," he said to me, looking me carefully in the eye.

I returned the gaze, some crazed animal, I venture.

"I know ... I know."

I left Farb's office and its building, passing by Phyllis, who smiled blandly at me, thinking me, I'm sure, just another lunatic her boss dealt with. Outside, on the broad, tree-lined avenue, under a sunshine blue sky of late spring afternoons, I looked for the bus that would take me back downtown – to my office, to my home, to the pressing realities of my day and my apparently unfortunate life. I glanced, rather sadly, at this quintessential, outer-city scene, this old-time suburban place, and felt so forlorn, so alienated from its assertion of comfort, stability, sanity. Everything is all right, the scene seemed to be saying. Nothing can be too terribly wrong, as long as scenes such as what is before you exist. And my heart, the wretched heart of Peter Ross, yearned for the comfort – the blessing of consolation – that it asserted.

Not even watching for traffic, I crossed the avenue, familiar enough with the neighborhood to know that a bus would most likely be on its way soon. It was now a little after four o'clock. I had less than an hour to get to party headquarters, to choose, I may fancifully say, to fashion my particular destiny. It came to me to wonder where a phone booth was. I wanted to try to get in touch again with Regina, to hear perhaps something familiar and warm, in her voice. Where was she? Why had she not called me? Had I really offended her so much, taken her beyond where she could go? I yearned for her physical presence beside me, to be in her arms. How could she abandon me, when I most needed her? Was she at her desk at work? Of course she was. Or, maybe, she was not. Maybe she was out somewhere, functioning without me, living her life without me, bringing happiness to herself and to someone else, opting for some goodly measure of peace, complacency even – and why not? People above all want peace. Isn't that right? Not truth. For what's truth anyway? Who really knows, when you get down to it? What maddens me, for instance, doesn't exist for the fellow next to me, huh?

Spying a public phone booth a half block away, I ran to it. I dug into my pocket, found change, and called Regina's work number. I held my breath as the phone rang. Once, twice – no cause for concern. Three, four – I began to grow fearful. Five, six – she was not going to be there. Or she knew somehow it was me calling her and was not going to answer her phone for me. Where could she be? Have I really lost her? Have I really done so much bad that I have lost her?

After several more unanswered rings, I hung up the phone. I could see my bus coming.

I got off the bus a few blocks from City Hall, which was a short walk through the buildings of the downtown municipal center. To my astonishment, as I walked along, pieces of my life actually passed before my mind's eye, which really shocked me, and made me wonder if in some way I weren't approaching some kind of death. Suddenly, of all things, I thought of myself in high school, of my father raking leaves off the lawn of our little house, of my sister sitting on our stoop in the early evening with her

boyfriends, of my mother – God bless her departed, cancer-defeated body and soul – making sandwiches in our kitchen for our school lunches. Two blocks from City Hall, I asked myself where was I going, why I was returning to my job? Was there nowhere else for me to go? Was I going to walk into that converted-attic room and continue to argue a moot point with Sylvie, as if she were the one who needed convincing? What was I doing? Was I really mindlessly on my way to convince her, my fellow office worker friend, as unimportant as I, why I couldn't sign my name to a piece of paper, that she had nothing to do with in the first place? Explain once again to her, fatuously, why I couldn't fall in line behind our mayor?

About a block from City Hall, I heard some music, the music of a small band, a small brass band. I could make out trumpets, playing slowly, softly, soulfully. Yet they also were playing with triumph, as if underscoring and underpinning the feelings and thoughts of the little group of people listening appreciatively to the music, a little group of colored people dressed in their best clothing, their church and formal-occasions clothing. Mostly there were middle-aged people, men in dark suits and women in bright, print dresses, who I realized as I got closer to them were singing low the plaintive notes of prayer. In their midst were a few very old people, clutching prayer beads and small, black *Bibles*. They were all standing and staring in the direction of an official-looking man behind a podium, who, I noticed was alongside a small monument with a plaque of someone's sculptured face, underneath which were carved a few, apparently commemorative words.

Glancing at my watch, I crossed the street, to be closer to what I now understood was a dedicatory ceremony, however modest, however almost shy.

As I stepped onto the sidewalk and found my place among the colored celebrants, the man behind the podium began to speak. He was a large man, with a full white beard, a man of dignity, but palpably also a man of thoughtfulness.

"Brothers and sisters," he began, in his deep voice. "You know that we are gathered together here this glorious day to honor our own ... Miss Annie Mae Murchison. We

are here today to pay tribute to her with this monument that shall forever mark her many, many accomplishments. Day after day, month after month, year after year, people will pass by this little spot of city ground, given over to her memory, and know the kind of blessed soul she was.”

The gentleman paused and wiped his brow, smiling beneficently at his audience.

“Now I don’t want to bore you with no long speech,” he resumed. “I don’t want to take from the celebration of Miss Annie Mae. But I do want to record for posterity, to make it known publicly, something of who this kind, little lady was. I want to tell to those souls out there who don’t quite know, or to remind those who do, how from the time she was a young woman sister Annie Mae labored unceremoniously for her community, labored for over 60 years. In my mind, I see her caring for our sick, comforting our old ones, teaching our children. I see her knocking on door after door, asking for donations for our church – for the church that was to be built. I see the great, broad grin on her black face when we overcame.” He spoke very slowly, punctuating his statement. “When we overcame trouble, poverty, discouragement, injustice. When we overcame ... That smiling, black face that broke your heart to see it and reminded you why you were alive, what work there was to do, what good work there was to do, that took you out of yourself.”

The gentleman shifted his weight, to ready himself for his valedictory point.

“Brothers and sisters, I remember what my mother once said to me a very long time ago about Miss Annie Mae. ‘Son of mine’, she said to me. ‘That little coal black lady, that peoples don’t even see, so little you look right over and by her, that nobody pays

no mind, has been chosen by God. She has been touched by God. She has been given a gift. Yes, that’s right, a gift. Keep your eye and mind and spirit on her, son, for there is deliverance in her every step, in her every word.”

The man stopped and sighed. I looked as closely as I could at the plaque that held the sculptured likeness of Miss Annie Mae Murchison’s face and some few words that I couldn’t make out. There was some shuffling among the audience, and then the gentleman held out his hand towards a lady on his right. She was very, very old, in her 80s, I guessed, also a small woman, very black, dressed in a hat with a long, colored feather attached to it. She was happy, shyly grinning, giggling almost, her eyes literally bright and shining.

“And now,” the gentleman said. “I want to bring Miss Annie Mae’s sister up to me. I want the lady to stand before us and receive our appreciation.” He looked to the little old lady. “Come on up, Miss Gloria, come on over here.” He continued to hold out his hand.

Ever so slowly, still grinning, giggling now, eyes still shining, Miss Gloria made her way, shuffling carefully to the gentleman, the podium and the monument, helped by a man and a woman, each holding her by the arm. The people in the audience began to clap, and, suddenly I found myself clapping, as furtively as I could manage it.

“Miss Gloria, accept this gift of our love for Miss Annie,” the gentleman asked her.

The little old woman reached his side and collected herself, straightening up as best she could and looking out upon the audience. She blinked her eyes a few times, steadied herself, and spoke in one of the most kind and frail voices I’ve ever heard.

“Pastor Thomas, I do thank you for my sister ... though ... ” Miss Gloria continued to smile and giggle nervously. “I don’t know ... how she’d take all this.

Annie Mae was a simple woman ... and she made no fuss about herself ... My sister, God rest her soul in the deepest rest, just wanted to help people ... she didn’t seem to care about anything else ... that’s all there was to her ... she just wanted to help people ... ”

A few minutes later, the crowd dispersed, leaving me alone on the sidewalk in front of Miss Annie Mae’s monument. Some people looked at me curiously, but didn’t pay too much attention, which I was happy about. I had an impulse to talk to someone, to one or two in the audience, to introduce myself, but I resisted. I simply stood there dumbly, gazing at Miss Annie’s sculptured face. It was now nearing five o’clock. I would be soon losing my job. I had no idea where Sylvie was. My sister had lost all kindness for me, I suspected. Perhaps Dr. Farb would never see me again.

As best I could, I resisted the impulse to drop upon my knees.

Instead I held my hands in front of me, clasped, hardly noticeable as clasped, elbows close to my side, and began to talk to Miss Annie Mae.

“Ma’am,” I began to her. “Teach me to be like you. Teach me your secrets. For I cannot do it by myself. I so want to be happy. I so want to walk through my life, my day, and feel that I am not doing something terribly wrong, thinking something terribly wrong. Miss Annie Mae, be my guide, be my teacher. Please, Miss Annie Mae. Please. Please. Please.”

August 2001

Street Smarts: An Experiential Learning Vignette

Viktoria Popova-Gonci, Long Island Center

As an assessment specialist, I get to indulge myself in daily readings of students' learning experiences described in their prior learning assessment (PLA) essays.

And, as it happens to most of us who are involved in PLA practices, my reading of students' essays inevitably results in contemplating my own learning, which may have occurred independently of formal educational experiences.

When conducting PLA workshops for students or evaluators, we discuss – to the amazement of novice participants – a wide array of sources from which students draw their learning. Whereas professional practice (of all kinds) appears to be one of the most common sources of experiential learning, it is not unusual for adult students to discuss learning that was gained as a result of various personal experiences. Thus, I decided to skip any learning experiences that may have occurred within structured, professional settings, and considered whether I had ever engaged in unstructured, independent learning and, if so, what could have prompted such learning projects?

I remembered that one of my experiential learning journeys originated with ... riding in a car. No, not even driving – riding. Oh, no, it wouldn't have been one of those peculiar requests like "Car Riding" (4 advanced liberal credits). But one of my learning experiences did begin with riding in a car (I had just come to this country and didn't have a driver's license – so I was riding just about everywhere). There I was, riding, and looking out of the window ...

Wendover Avenue ... Holden Road ... Gloucester Street ... Could Wendover be a misspelled version of "over the wind"? It's poetic, but an unlikely denotation.

As a foreign student, I was eager to make sense of every new word that would get in the way of my understanding of the language. Thus, the meanings of some

street names would give me a green light, validating well-spent years of toiling to learn the English language: *Friendly Avenue*, *Market Street* or *Battleground*. With other streets, it was like driving (well, riding) at night in the rain, always trying to guess the names. The whirl of unintelligible street names resulted in more questions, which led me to leafing through more and more dictionaries. I was getting fascinated with the stories engraved in every street name I passed. In search of stories hidden behind the names of the streets, I found something I wasn't even looking for: I found the history of the English language. It is the history of English language itself that was ciphered in street names. City street names were no longer mere signs assisting travelers in distinguishing one road from another and in trying to find themselves in the city maze. I discovered that street names are traces of our ancestors, traces that enable us to understand who we are in the much larger maze of history.

Having found definitions and origins of many street names, I discovered that all of these names can be grouped by their origins: Roman, Celtic, Saxon, Danish, pre-Celtic and Norman. Remember Daniel Defoe's "Your Roman – Saxon – Danish – Norman English"?

Indeed, the English language is composed of a multicolored combination of languages. Interestingly, I found that street names have even preserved the linguistic evidence of people that set foot on the British islands long before the Romans did. Street names have delighted antiquarians and alerted us to much earlier times, taking us back to the pre-Celtic inhabitants of the island. Thus, in reference to the street names and in taking the liberty of using the Defoe outline, we have our pre-Celtic – Celtic – Roman – Saxon – Danish – Norman streets.

Once, I grouped most of the city street names by their historic origins and, unwittingly, mapped out the whole history



Viktoria Popova-Gonci

of English language development from proto-English pre-Celtic tribes (prior to the fourth century B.C.), whose language has not been restored, and the only linguistics evidence of the mysterious inhabitants has been incidentally preserved in a very small number of place names, to the universal kaleidoscope of Late Modern English.

A few years later, I did take a course in the History of the English Language. By that time, I lived in a different city, drove a car and treated street names as mere amenities. On the first day of class, as I was leafing through my English Language History textbook filled with images of robust Vikings and Norman aristocracy, I came across a brief discussion of toponymy. I started reminiscing about those days when I was overwhelmed with excitement, discovering, at literally every turn, the histories and etymologies of street names. I wanted to go back to that city, to those streets. I couldn't – it was too far. But I knew there are more cities and more streets and more stories to learn about, and more histories to rediscover; and, of course, more "street smarts" to gain.

Two Poems

Heidi Nightengale, Central New York Center

Standing at the Kitchen Sink

I wrote a poem standing at the kitchen sink
with the light from night almost new. In my head
the round, brown words pulling pictures
over and through like thread

and not ready to write,
I said them aloud to remember later what poems could do.
All this and waiting by the kitchen sink
for a can of soup to warm. In the middle of the soup
and these words,

I saw in the window two thin leaves
that stayed with the oldest maple through December
and thinking they were like us,
alone together with ideas about trees,

I clapped my hands like you to scatter winter birds
and wait for their chatter and the plans that come
with warm soup.

Being Seven in America

after watching the nightly news

I watch a classroom in a near city
where a tall teacher tells 23 children
what they need:
air, water, food, clothes, shelter, love.
Everything else in this world, she says, is want.

I move over with this lesson of wanting learned late in life
thinking the child of seven in the second row
with hair beaded in red, white, yellow
knows something of love. When asked, she tells:

“I need nothing for now.”

I mark this for memory:
Talk to tall teacher.
We need wanting so we should
know the difference.
We need poetry so we should know.

What Really is “Magical Thinking”?

Margaret Souza, Metropolitan Center

Confronted with prior learning essays from mentees on learning experiences that might receive college credit, we rely on our academic training to provide us with the professional tools and insights to adequately (and with sensitivity and integrity) approach the task. However, what if a student’s description straddles two disciplines and/or encompasses material that we have not experienced or whose meaning we do not really know? How do we reconcile the discrepancies between our grounded knowledge and the empirical data from our students when that information (or approach to the information) might even challenge the knowledge of the experts?

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion presents us with a rich opportunity to reflect on these kinds of issues. As a gifted writer, she ventures into the territory of bereavement as a sufferer who finds expression for her grief in a place familiar to her: the experience of writing. What we find is an unsettling piece of literature that expresses the experience and the pain of loss that has permeated her life. I want to problematize the complexity of Didion’s work, especially in light of our efforts to understand credit by evaluation (CBE) at Empire State College.

In her writing, Didion not only shares her personal experience but also takes on the bereavement experts and challenges the theoretical underpinning of traditional scholarship in the field. How would a student fare when confronting such a daunting task if her name and reputation did not precede her?

Thus, my first question might be: should I suggest to this “student,” Ms. Didion, that she *not* submit this essay for review to a person who would be evaluating a CBE on bereavement, but rather recommend that this “book” more properly be evaluated as a piece of literature and recommend that it be

sent to an evaluator in creative writing? In this way, my student would not have to deal with the complexity of her quite distinctive approach to grief. Rather, an evaluator would focus on her writing style, the flow of her prose, the overall aesthetics of her presentation.

Indeed, the book is an incredible piece of literature. The issue is, however, whether it is *more*? Could we learn about bereavement from such a very personal reflection? Didion’s book does reveal the reality of grieving in keeping with a postmodern scholarly approach to death and dying that accents the importance of a view from within. She provides a voice that reflects the experience of grief, perhaps not unique, but different from the view developed in the psychological literature that have been the dominant voices in bereavement research and literature. However, if the submission did not come from Joan Didion – if it came from Maria Rodriguez, would we be able to accept her perspective as valuable and knowledgeable? Would we take the time and make the effort to do this?

However, if the submission did not come from Joan Didion – if it came from Maria Rodriguez, would we be able to accept her perspective as valuable and knowledgeable? Would we take the time and make the effort to do this?

In Didion’s book, we *do* recognize the depth and breadth of her knowledge of the subject matter. It is clearly written by a person who is well read in this area, as well as many other areas. The troublesome issue is that Didion-as-CBE-submitter does not always agree with the “masters.” How does knowledge get to be validated if an expert does not recognize it, let alone produce it?

Didion begins her work with what she cannot remember, as if in a fog, the days after her husband’s death. Only sketchy details come to mind in her rather stream of consciousness manner. This description is juxtaposed with detailed memory and vivid story telling of the events that preceded her husband’s death, the moment of his death, and the awareness of the reality of the death. The details that seem unclear to her will be filled in throughout the book, as she seeks to piece together what happened – perhaps to try to make sense of what to her is a senseless loss. Didion’s tragedy is doubly entwined, as her only child, her daughter, lies unconscious in the ICU of a local hospital. The experts (for example, Rando 1993) would call her experience “complicated grief.” She carefully describes her experience, always connecting her ongoing life – in a well-constructed reflexive mode – to her previous married life. It also is obvious that she is able to understand others’ experiences from newspaper articles or books experientially recognizing their descriptions in her existence.

For example, she wonders whether her husband, John, was aware that he was going to die, as Aries (1981) indicates that he would. Differentiating grief from the loss experienced at her parent’s death, she goes on to express how this grief results in a kind of “magical thinking,” a quality of thinking that at times she does not even recognize as part of her daily existence. Often, some event – something she sees or hears or feels – brings her to the realization of her

expectation, her wish, her dream of John's return. She struggles to reverse the death, to bring him back, if only she could find the right way. The reality of his death is the part of her book that remains troublesome for her, but even more certainly for a reader or evaluator.

Didion reads to learn, to focus on the process. She does come across "complicated grief," pathological grief and spouts anger at Volkan whose research (1975) constructs the experience in such a way as to push her to question if the relationship she had with her husband was one of pathological dependency. But how, she wonders, can Volkan know what the experience is? Was he there? She acknowledges that hers is an irrational anger, but does his research truly illuminate her experience? Her anger perhaps can best be understood as she goes on to read Emily Post's 1922 description of what one should experience as grief and the manner in which the griever should be treated. Aries' (1981) recognition and Gorer's (1965) description of how mourning has been removed and needs to be removed from public display seems to resonate with the accepted way in which people "should" grieve in Western society today. Didion, however, is providing us with a public recording of the lived, the most personal experience as it is in all of its particularity and anguish. So, for example, he reveals that when a person loses someone, her facial expression is different and is recognizable to others who are having the same experience. But, of course, this notion that grief and the grieving are revealed only to others who are undergoing the same experience flies in the face of the professional literature that evaluates and categorizes it based on specific assumptions about what is normal and what isn't.

Didion's CBE submission provides us with a chronology of events in the life and death of her husband intertwined with her daughter's illness. The ongoing need to avoid places of remembrance that continue to beset her at regular intervals illuminates not the supposedly necessary experience of "moving on" so dominant in bereavement literature, but the wish not to be drawn back to the

places and things that fill her existence with his presence. Is this just a different angle on mourning? Would it be recognizable, would it be acceptable, to an "expert" in this area?

And so we return to the uncomfortable questions I want to raise here: when is knowledge validated as knowledge? How would this book be evaluated as a CBE? While it is true that one *Times* critic believed it to be too emotional and revealing, with Didion's name as the author, we do accept her distinctive perspective. But would we, as evaluators, be uncomfortable with so much personal "stuff"? How would we view what is, in effect, her dismissal of the scholarly research as she revels in her lived experience? Might we just dismiss this student as experiencing pathological grief requiring professional assistance? Might we, as one mentor told me he recommended to his student, have to move from this "personal information" and tie in theoretical material to provide the CBE with some serious academic substance that could be evaluated as legitimate college-level learning? Or, might we wish to move from this type of narrative altogether and be more comfortable if she could provide us with the insights that are usually found in conventional textbooks in the field?

These reflections focus on the evaluating of CBEs. However, I want to get to the heart of the question of what is knowledge. Who can construct it? When constructed, how can any "knowledge" be validated, or perhaps who has to validate it before it can be understood as legitimate knowledge? So, for example, has Didion's book in any way caused the field of psychology to rethink its literature on grief? Certainly it is in keeping with some of the new scholarly literature (Klass et al. 1996), but that is a minority voice in the larger discipline. How would we evaluate this book? As one of my colleagues indicated, maybe the most academically appropriate thing would be to recommend that the student receive 2 1/2 credits in memoir writing! Or, perhaps we would secretly think that submitting this material for evaluation in the field of bereavement is just one more element of this student's own "magical thinking."

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Core Values of Empire State College (2005)

The core values of Empire State College reflect the commitments of a dynamic, participatory and experimenting institution accessible and dedicated to the needs of a richly diverse adult student body. These values are woven into the decisions we make about what we choose to do, how we carry out our work in all parts of the institution, and how we judge the outcome of our individual and collective efforts. More than a claim about what we have already attained, the core values support our continuing inquiry about what learning means and how it occurs.

We value learning-mentoring goals that:

- respond to the academic, professional and personal needs of each student;
- identify and build upon students' existing knowledge and skills;
- sustain lifelong curiosity and critical inquiry;
- provide students with skills, insights and competencies that support successful college study.

We value learning-mentoring processes that:

- emphasize dialogue and collaborative approaches to study;
- support critical exploration of knowledge and experience;
- provide opportunities for active, reflective and creative academic engagement.

We value learning-mentoring modes that:

- respond to a wide array of student styles, levels, interests and circumstances;
- foster self-direction, independence and reflective inquiry;
- provide opportunities for ongoing questioning and revising;
- reflect innovation and research.

We value a learning-mentoring community that:

- defines each member as a learner, encouraging and appreciating his/her distinctive contributions;

- recognizes that learning occurs in multiple communities, environments and relationships as well as in formal academic settings;
- attracts, respects and is enriched by a wide range of people, ideas, perspectives and experiences.

We value a learning-mentoring organization and culture that:

- invites collaboration in the multiple contexts of our work;
- fosters innovation and experimentation;
- develops structures and policies that encourage active participation of all constituents in decision-making processes;
- advocates for the interests of adult learners in a variety of academic and civic forums.

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