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Back to the Future, or Please Come to Boston

John Bird

Winthrop University, birdj@winthrop.edu

Teaching and Learning Center

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UpComing Sessions

The Employable
Graduate 1/15

FERPA Training
1/17

Blackboard
Training, various
times

register at:
<http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/TrainingCalendar/default.asp>

Dr. John Bird
Professor,
Department of
English
Bancroft Hall 260
(803) 323-3679

Director, Teaching &
Learning Center
Dinkins Hall 233
(803) 323-2447

EMAIL:
birdj@winthrop.edu

Winthrop University
Rock Hill, SC

Back To the Future, or Please Come To Boston

Another semester begins, and I am supposed to go into cheerleader mode, extolling the virtues of starting afresh and urging us all (myself especially!) to head once more unto the breach. But that cheerleader mode does not reflect my current mood, so I will go with the flow.

I returned Sunday night from Boston after attending the annual convention of the Modern Language Association. MLA is huge, the world's largest gathering of professors of English and modern languages. When MLA descends on a city during the winter break, it is like an invasion of tweed and berets and literary theory. It is not uncommon to hear people in the hallways earnestly discussing Derrida, in French and English, and the number of different languages makes the convention hotel a modern-day Tower of Babel. It is an exhilarating, exhausting, challenging four days. And for me this year, more than a bit depressing.

My first feelings of depression came over me as I watched younger scholars stalking the halls and corridors of the Boston Sheraton and Hynes Convention Center in what were clearly "interview suits": guys in somber dark wool, women in equally dark power suits. I could sense their anxiety as they roamed the halls, and suddenly I time traveled to 1985 and 1986 and 1987, to MLA in New York and Chicago, and I saw my younger, skinnier self in in one of those somber interview suits, hurrying to my one or three or five interviews, each year a bit better (but never enough), and my heart silently went out to those anxious young people. I know, I have been there, I repeated in my head.

In spite of being a vortex of academic energy and inquiry, MLA (and, I'm sure, the concomitant major conference of each discipline) also becomes a vortex of anxiety and angst. I experienced that

anxiety and angst best when I paused, sitting under a heat lamp outside the Westin Copley Place, braving the Boston winter to smoke a contemplative pipe. I encountered many of these young, anxious job seekers, talked to a few, but mainly just eavesdropped as they talked to one another. A young woman who smoked her cigarette hurriedly as she thumbed through index cards. A middle-aged man who recounted to his new temporary friend all the indignities of the past ten years as a gypsy scholar. And then the clincher, at least for my gathering gloom: the overheard comment from one earnest young man to another that "the job market is horrible right now, but it will pick up in the next year or two as older professors retire."

Déjà vu all over again, as that great scholar Yogi Berra probably did not say. I could have been back in 1985 or 1986,

“Déjà vu all over again, as that great scholar Yogi Berra probably did not say. I could have been back in 1985 or 1986, either hearing those same words or uttering them myself. I left MLA and Boston a bit depressed, a bit oppressed, partly from remembering my own deep anxiety, but mostly from empathy with these bright young people . . . ”



Continued from page 1

either hearing those same words or uttering them myself. I left MLA and Boston a bit depressed, a bit oppressed, partly from remembering my own deep anxiety, but mostly from empathy with these bright young people, fully engaged in PhD programs, already presenting and publishing to an extent that those of my generation did not have to, piling up student loan debt that would take years to pay off—if they could manage to get a tenure track job. Nearly thirty years after I first heard and uttered those words, I realize with a shock that, in their young eyes, I am now one of those older professors. And sorry to say, kiddo, I ain't going nowhere. At least not yet.

On the plane ride home, I read newspaper articles about the vast changes in higher education, about new and difficult challenges, about MOOCs, about the shrinking job market, about challenges to tenure. Knowing I was at MLA and thinking about these matters, my English department colleague Jo Koster sent me a link to a rebuttal of another newspaper article, an article that claimed the least stressful job in America is being a college professor. Thanks to Jo,

here is that link:

<http://factsandotherfairytal.es.com/2013/01/04/the-least-stressful-job-for-2013-a-real-look-at-being-a-professor-in-the-us/>

But Monday brought a new day, the first day of the semester, and since I knew I had to go away, I had my syllabi ready, well ahead of time for once, which proves the Mayans may have been right. I walked into my 3:30 class and looked around at the 16 young people sitting in Owens 209, freshmen and sophomores and a junior in an honors section of CRTW, their books and notebooks in front of them, eager to begin, eager to learn—and my depression from MLA and the larger world melted away, and I began, once more unto the breach. Gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.

Whatever challenges the present situation holds, whatever changes the future brings, we are here, now, and we have jobs, and we have students, and even in the midst of the gloom of winter, spring has begun, again, once again, round and round and round in the circle game.

Excellent TLC Session: The Employable Graduate 1/15

Come join us on January 15 at 11:00 am for an engaging and informative session with Dr. Amanda Hiner from the Department of English. Here is Amanda's description:

“Can we assure that our graduates have what it takes to succeed in today's increasingly global and competitive marketplace? Can we be sure that they have acquired the skills employers actually need? Even in the face of high unemployment rates, employers frequently complain of a pervasive and troubling “skills gap”: college graduates have degrees, but lack the essential skills to make them both employable and professionally successful once they obtain a job. This TLC session will cover important research and findings from the groundbreaking 2011 study Academically Adrift and the 2012 Social Science Research Council study Documenting Uncertain Times and will reveal the key intellectual skills and traits college graduates need to acquire jobs and succeed in the workplace.”

XXITE 2.0 ----- The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with

those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and

technology. You'll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at <http://wuxxite.ning.com/> Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: <http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/>

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Join XXITE 2.0 or
Register for a TLC
Session
At
www.winthrop.edu/tlc

Thought for The Week

"Wrinkles should merely
indicate where smiles have
been."
Pudd'nhead Wilson's New
Calendar--Mark Twain