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## Some Thoughts Before Spring Break: Great Teachers, Engaging Students, High Standards, and Busting Boredom

John Bird  
Winthrop University, [birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu)

Teaching and Learning Center

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# The Weekly Reader

Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

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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](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu)

Winthrop University

## Some Thoughts Before Spring Break: Great Teachers, Engaging Students, High Standards, and Busting Boredom

A grab bag of thoughts in this week before Spring Break:

First off, isn't it great that we have a job that gives us (most of us) a Spring Break? Who is looking forward to this more—the students or the teachers? The past few years, my wife and I have traveled to sunny, exotic places: Hawaii, Panama, Puerto Rico. This year, I will be close to home, but I am looking forward to starting my spring garden, working on a presentation for later this month, and writing two articles and a book review. Not kidding—I am looking forward to all of those activities, plus some pleasure reading and, of course, watching college basketball until my eyeballs bleed.

Today, I was honored to be included in a panel our colleague Gary Stone organizes for our new teachers. Gary let me and three other Kinard Award winners—Janice Chism, Biology/Anthropology, Laura Ullrich, Economics, and Augustus Belk, Jr., Political Science—talk to

Winthrop's first-year teachers about our philosophy of teaching, then to have a discussion about common problems and concerns.

The topic that emerged first was engagement. All four of us talked about how important it is to begin at the point of student engagement—if students are not engaged in the course, they are much less likely to succeed and to learn. I never thought about this before just now, as I write, but I see an underlying metaphor in “engagement,” a comparison of teaching and learning to marriage. If a class is a marriage, the first step is to get engaged. How can you get married without an engagement?

We all agree that engagement has to begin with us. If we are not engaged with the material, really engaged, fully steeped in it, consumed by it, enthusiastic about it, excited by it, there is very little chance the students

will get engaged.

Both Laura and Adolphus talked about the ways they get to know their students, from quickly learning their names in Adolphus' case to the way Laura gets to know her students' backgrounds and interests, and then uses them to motivate, challenge, and nurture each student. Janice talked about activities outside of class that engage students: the class trip to the zoo she took last Friday to examine primate behavior, and her upcoming trip to the Galapagos Islands (I want to go on both!).

I shared a formula that I wrote about a few years ago in *The Weekly Reader*: engage, challenge, nurture. We have to engage students first, catch their interest, inflame them with the same enthusiasm we have, then challenge them, with readings, assignments, papers, tests, projects. And then nurture them as they try to meet those challenges. Then repeat the process,

*"I left today's session invigorated and excited about teaching, which happens every time Gary (himself a Kinard Award winner) invites me to this session. I am also excited to be a member of a group of such talented and dedicated teachers, on that panel with Gary, Janice, Adolphus, and Laura, to be sure, but also to be in that room with teachers in their first year here, perhaps a bit overwhelmed, but eager and excited to become even better. And to be joined with the great teachers all over campus, in every college."*



## Continued from page 1

sometimes scrambling the steps.

Adolphus, Laura, and Janice were eloquent about the value they place on challenging their students, the high standards they hold for their students, and the way that most students can step up and meet those standards—usually after first falling and needing some subsequent nurturing.

We also talked about the advantages and disadvantages of technology in teaching and learning. I urged everyone to do a Google search for "Death by PowerPoint," which I also wrote about last year or the year before. Used merely as slides on a screen for us to talk about, PowerPoint can indeed be deadly boring and static as a teaching tool, but it can also be dynamic. I suggested that instead of reading a slide, just project it and ask, "What does the first point mean? What do you think about that?" The key is to make them actively read instead of passively listening. Both Adolphus and Janice use their presentations as more of an outline for their lectures and discussion. I talked about the idea of "Reverse PowerPoint": come to class with a chapter or a subject

presented in a nearly blank outline form, with major headings filled in, but leaving blanks for the students to fill in. The first time I tried this, I stood at the podium and typed what the students found in the textbook, but after that, I had students do the typing.

One question was about leading class discussion, which leads me to pause here and invite you to my TLC session, "Leading Class Discussion," April 5 at 11:00 am. I presented this workshop a few years ago, and I did it again at last month's TLC Conference. Please come if you can! Class discussion can be very tricky, even disastrous, but when it works well, almost nothing can beat it.

I left today's session invigorated and excited about teaching, which happens every time Gary (himself a Kinard Award winner) invites me to this session. I am also excited to be a member of a group of such talented and dedicated teachers, on that panel with Gary, Janice, Adolphus, and Laura, to be sure, but also to be in that room with teachers in their first year here, perhaps a bit overwhelmed, but eager and excited to become even better. And to be joined with the great

teachers all over campus, in every college.

I mentioned boredom a bit ago. That reminds me of a short article I read last week about engaging students in difficult reading, despite their claims of boredom. It came from the *Tomorrow's Professor* newsletter from Stanford, which I receive twice a week (Google it to find their archives and to subscribe if you want—I highly recommend it). "Boredom Busters," by Jennifer Fletcher, talks about the difference between true boredom and "pseudo-boredom," a term she takes from composition scholar Charles Bazerman. As Bazerman explains, "Genuine boredom occurs when you are reading material you already know only too well.... Pseudo-boredom comes when you feel you just cannot be bothered to figure out what all the new information and ideas mean." That statement really rang a bell with me—I can't wait to use the ideas from this article the next time students complain that the reading is "boring." Here is the link to the whole article:

<https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/1469>

And now, on to Spring Break, and then the race to the finish!

## Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

## A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a 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 (803) 323-3679 or [birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu).

## Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Register for a TLC Session  
At  
[www.winthrop.edu/tlc](http://www.winthrop.edu/tlc)

## The 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Many thanks to everyone who attended and presented at our conference on Saturday, February 6. We had 102 attendees, who heard excellent presentations and an inspiring keynote speech by Dr. Dan Mahony. Special thanks to Dana Bruneau for her work in organizing the conference.

## Thought For the Week

"St. Patrick had no politics; his sympathies lay with the right--that was politics enough. When he came across a reptile, he forgot to inquire whether he was a Democrat or a Republican, but simply exalted his staff and 'let him have it.'"  
--Mark Twain