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Old Teachers, New Teachers—and Some Thoughts on Successful Teaching as We Begin Another School Year

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Old Teachers, New Teachers—and Some Thoughts on Successful Teaching as We Begin Another School Year

So, here we go again! My colleague in the English Department, Jo Koster, posted on Facebook yesterday that this was the start of her 24th year at Winthrop. I realized that was true for me too. Even with so many years under my belt, I always have feelings of excitement and anticipation about a new school year. (When I stop feeling that way, I will know it is time for me to retire.)

For the past few years, Gary Stone has asked me to meet with the new faculty during their orientation. I got to do that again Friday, and it always reminds me of my first day here, of the many welcomes from strange faces, some of whom are gone, but many of whom are still here and have become good friends and trusted colleagues.

I ask the new faculty to write down the name of their best teacher ever, then briefly to explain why. We always have a good discussion. This year I was very pleased that so many of them identified a

college teacher as their best. (Usually the best teacher list is dominated by elementary school teachers.) I was reminded once again that great and inspiring teaching comes in many forms, at all levels.

Yesterday I got an email from one of those new faculty members, asking me if I could share with him what I thought were key teaching qualities that would make him successful at Winthrop. Rather than answer his question, I told him I would make his question the subject of this year's first *Weekly Reader*.

First, a successful teacher must have a thorough mastery of her subject, both by background and ongoing study. In some ways, that is the easiest part, since we all have studied for so long in school and are fully trained in the subject matter of our disciplines.

Second, a successful teacher must begin with thoughtful and careful

planning. That includes long-range as well as day-to-day planning, but it also includes a willingness to change, to be flexible. Making the syllabus is not the most exciting thing in the world, but a good syllabus is the first step toward a successful course. It's also a good idea to change that syllabus every few years, incorporating new content, new approaches, and new projects, paper assignments, and other assessments.

At the school where I taught before I came to Winthrop nearly a quarter century ago, one of my colleagues was walking down the hall with a huge bundle of yellowed legal pages gathered into her arms. I asked her what all the paper was. "It's my course!" she exclaimed. I was horrified—I can't imagine carrying any of my courses around like that, year after year, yellowing and ossified.

Third, a successful teacher at Winthrop must be student-centered. We have a duty to our

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students. That doesn't mean coddling them or giving them rewards for little or shoddy work. But it does mean that our main focus is on student learning and student success.

Several years ago, my *Weekly Reader* column was entitled “Engage, Challenge, Motivate, Nurture.” I proposed that process as a key to successful student-centered teaching, a process that endlessly repeats, sometimes in a different order. In some ways, what I wrote there might be the best answer to our new faculty member's question. Here is the link to that column: <http://digitalcommons.wintrop.edu/weeklyreader/36/>

Finally (although this list could be much longer), a successful teacher must be an excellent communicator. You can have all the knowledge in the world on a subject, but if you can't communicate that knowledge clearly, you will not be an effective teacher. That doesn't mean that we all have to be amazing, powerful, mesmerizing speakers. Very few people are. But it does mean being able to talk about our subjects in ways that are clear, understandable, engaging, and interesting.

Combine a strong background in a discipline, careful planning, and a clear focus on students with excellent communication skills, and you will be a very successful teacher.

One of the great things about successful teaching is that there is no one right way, no one particular style, no certain personality that will make it happen. When I asked the new faculty about their best teacher ever, it was clear from their answers that all different kinds of teachers and teaching made it to the top of their lists.

I think about my best teachers. One was a dynamic and inspiring speaker. Another was a kind and caring nurturer. Another was very quiet and reserved, but she was so into her subject, world history, that her quiet enthusiasm was infectious. I am glad that we don't all have to be alike!

After my meeting with the new faculty, I remembered four or five things I meant to tell them. One was my teaching mantra, which many of you have heard me repeat: “The person who talks the most learns the most.” I try to remember that when I plan each class and when

I get to class.

One thing I did tell the new faculty is that we all have had many years of training in our subject matter, but most of us have had very little training in how to be a successful teacher. That is what the Teaching and Learning Center is here for. I invited our new faculty to attend TLC sessions, to request topics they need or are interested in, even to lead a session on a topic of their interest and expertise. I send that invitation to all faculty and staff.

Many thanks to my new colleague who asked such a good and important question. I have a feeling that his enthusiasm and dedication has already made him a very successful teacher. I hope my words from someone near the end of a long teaching career will be of some help as he continues his journey toward what we all aspire to be: every year, every semester, every class a better teacher.

And now, as I asked the new students yesterday at convocation: “Are you ready?”



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.

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 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

The 4th Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Watch this space for information about the 4th Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning. The call for papers and proposals will be coming soon!

Thought For the Week

"It were not best that we should all think alike; it is difference of opinion that makes horse-races."
--Mark Twain