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A Few Parting Thoughts as We Reach the End: A Toast to the Teachers, Who Have Faith in a Seed

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A Few Parting Thoughts as We Reach the End: A Toast to the Teachers, Who Have Faith in a Seed

The end of another semester and another academic year is here, bringing on a mad rush to the finish for students, faculty and staff. As hard as it is to believe, we will make it to the end, somehow, despite papers to grade, projects to evaluate, grades to average, and ending tasks to complete.

But for me, this is really the end. This will be the last issue of The Weekly Reader that I write.

Eight years of these weekly newsletters, averaging 24 issues a year (I seem to have slacked off a bit in my final year).

I try to write these on Tuesdays, although sometimes the pressures of school turn that into Thursday, or some weeks, not at all. I think of all those Tuesdays when I sat here and stared at a blank screen. Somehow, an idea always came to me—eventually.

Oddly, I feel like I still have much to say. But the end has come, so I will have to do that in another forum. I have enjoyed sharing my thoughts about teaching and learning with you: the challenges, the frustrations, the obstacles, but also the joy, the inspiration, the rewards.

I have greatly appreciated the kind words people have sent me after a particular column touched them, challenged them, inspired them. I have saved those messages in a special folder. I have only received one email that asked me to stop sending The Weekly Reader. I suggested the delete button, which I am sure this person took advantage of. Can’t please everybody!

As I retire and move on to the next chapter, I can’t resist sharing a few last words and thoughts.

First, I urge all of us to remain reflective about our teaching. We have to do so in annual reports, but we ought to reflect on our teaching all the time. We teach our students about metacognition, thinking about their thinking, but we should practice meta-teaching, and think about our teaching before we teach, as we teach, and after we teach. Being a reflective teacher is one of the surest ways to improve.

Second, I urge you to take advantage of the wealth of material we have available to help us become better teachers. Dacus Library has a good collection of books on teaching and learning, many of which I have reviewed in the earlier days of The Weekly Reader. I abandoned my practice of trying to read a book a week on pedagogy, but I certainly found that discipline to be very helpful. Summer is a great time to read some of these books. Beach reading!

Third, I want to repeat my teaching mantra, one I have shared many times before, but which I think is at the center of teaching success: “The person who talks the most thinks the most. The person who
“As teachers, we have the power to change lives. This is an awesome and awe-inspiring phenomenon. How many of us had a teacher who changed our lives with a single sentence, a single word? How many of us have had students tell us we changed their lives? I have had students I couldn’t even remember tell me that. Amazing.”

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thinks the most learns the most.”

I shared my analogy about a weightlifting class. I imagined our recently-retired colleague Charlie Bowers teaching his weightlifting class by standing in front of his students, talking to them as he demonstrated curls, bench presses, and leg lifts while the students watched and took notes. Who will build muscle?

One of the greatest things about being a teacher is how much we ourselves learn. It amazes me to think how much I have learned in the past 40 years by teaching. Despite my efforts, I still talked the most, so I thought the most and learned the most. But I have confidence my students did a lot of thinking and learning themselves.

Finally, I want to remind ourselves how important it is that we do what we do. Important for ourselves, important for our students, important for Winthrop, and important for the world.

As teachers, we do not receive monetary rewards commensurate with our importance. We knew that sad fact when we signed on, and it is a sad fact. We do not even command the amount of respect in society that we deserve, in many quarters. Witness the fact that the state legislature has steadily cut its funding for higher education over the years, leading us to the point where one body of the legislature is proposing zero dollars for higher education this year. Zero!

But we know our value, and our students know our value, as do all enlightened people. That fact helps us keep going, despite the frustrations and the obstacles.

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And we usually don’t really know the effect we are having. We are like itinerant farmers who walk along, dropping seeds, nurturing them for a time, then moving on, often before the flowers and plants and trees come to full fruition. But we have faith in a seed. We keep preparing the ground, dropping our seeds, watering them, nurturing them, pruning them. Then moving on.

Now it is time for me to move on. I want to thank Dana Bruneau for her years as program coordinator for the Teaching and Learning Center. I always appreciated Dana’s excellent work, but I have even more so this year as I tried (and often failed) to do her job. Thanks to Ann Barrett for her help on this year’s conference. And many thanks to Gloria Jones, Dean of University College, for her guidance and support these last eight years.

Many thanks to all the faculty and staff who conducted sessions for the TLC—your talent and expertise make the TLC run, despite a less than limited budget. And thanks to all who attended sessions—I hope your teaching life has been enriched.

Finally, thanks to you who have read these columns. Writing is talking, so I talked the most and thus learned the most. But I truly hope you have learned too. I have faith in a seed, and even though I may not be around to see it, I have great hopes for the flowers that will bloom, the trees that will bear fruit. Farewell, friends!
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

Thought For the Week

“it is good to obey all the rules when you're young, so you'll have the strength to break them when you're old.”
--Mark Twain