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Start Me Up

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I was talking to the new faculty last week, and I suddenly realized that I have now been teaching for thirty-five years. This does not seem possible! I remember the hot August day in 1977 that I entered my first classroom, 10th and 11th grade English at Mooresville Senior High. I have caught up with some of those “kids” on Facebook, and several of them now have grandchildren. I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear my trousers rolled… (I taught them that poem that first year. What did I know then of growing old?)

Except for my first year in my PhD studies, I have taught all of those years. What a jumble of books and assignments and syllabi and tests and papers—and what a procession of new beginnings. Instead of a pep talk, a hearty “once more into the breech,” I have some sobering reflections, particularly about the nature of our new students. I hope it not bad to start a new year with a bit of a downer. As I think I have written before, I have seen a steady decline in students’ general reading ability over these years that I have been teaching. Studies bear this out, as does the experience of many of us. While students have certainly gained in many skills, particularly computer and digital skills, they do not read as well and as competently as they once did, and that decline seems to grow deeper with each passing year. A number of years ago, I realized that I am teaching reading as much as I am teaching literature.

The past several summers, I have been involved in the “First Class” program for incoming freshmen during orientation. I talk to them about college and our expectations in the classroom, and one of the things I always emphasize is the importance of critical reading. For the first few years, I would give them my handout “How To Read Critically,” and we would talk about the crucial skill of annotating a text: underlining and writing key words in the margins. I would watch with dismay as four or five of the students would throw this handout in the garbage on their way out. To save paper, and as a bit of an experiment, I no longer give them the handout. Instead, I tell them that I have the key to success in college, and ask them if they are interested. They always say they are—and then I project the handout and talk to them about critical reading, and the ways reading for college differs from the way they read in high school. I give them my email address and tell them to write me and I will send them the handout. The first few times I did this, I was dismayed that only about half of the students emailed me and asked for what I was telling them is the key to success in college. Last year, even fewer asked. This summer, I was totally shocked when, after these sessions with 30 or 40 new students, only four or five from each session emailed me to ask for the handout. Admittedly a small sample, and certainly not a scientific study, but I have an intuition that this year’s incoming class, despite many talents, in general does not have the intellectual curiosity to ask for what they are told is the key to something they all profess to want. I hope
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my intuition is wrong. I hope my students are anomalous. But I fear that I am correct. I do not totally despair for them. They will encounter critical reading in WRIT 101, HMXP 102, and CRTW 201—and they will get that handout, since it is bound into the handbook they use in all three courses. And I know they will encounter critical reading in many of their other classes. But I sound my warning again: if you assign reading to your students in your classes, and if you assume that they are doing that reading, reading critically, your assumption will be wrong for the vast majority of your students. I suggest that you take my handout, revise it if you wish, and give it to your students. They can learn to read critically, and that really can be the key to success in college for them, but they need some help and guidance. (The handout is available at the following link, down near the bottom of the page: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/mainresources.html If you want it as a Word file, send me an email and I will send it to you.)

So here we go again, another year, and I start with a bit of a downer message. But two quick stories to show there is a bright side: yesterday, a former student who is now a high school teacher (very near Mooresville, coincidentally) wrote on my Facebook wall that she was in another teacher’s classroom and saw a bulletin board about critical reading. She thought to herself, “That sounds like what Dr. Bird always did.” Then she saw, down near the bottom, a credit to John Bird of Winthrop University. Aha! And just now, as I was walking to lunch, a student stopped me on the sidewalk, told me she had been in my orientation session, and said that she emailed me to ask for the handout, but I had never replied. Aha! A bit of hope. Once more into the breech!

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.

Thought for The Week

“If there wasn’t anything to find out, it would be dull. Even trying to find out and not finding out is just as interesting as trying to find out and finding out; and I don’t know but more so.”

---Eve’s Diary --Mark Twain