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John Bird
Winthrop University, birdj@winthrop.edu
Teaching and Learning Center

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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

Winthrop University Rock Hill, SC

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Eat That Frog!: Some Thoughts About Procrastination

Last week, a friend of mine posted this quotation as his Facebook status: “If it’s your job to eat a frog, it’s best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it’s your job to eat two frogs, it’s best to eat the biggest one first.” The quotation was attributed to Mark Twain. I posted that I doubted Mark Twain actually said that—first because I had never seen it before, but more importantly because it did not sound like him. I checked the Twain quotation sources that I trusted, and none of them had it, as I suspected. But when I googled the quotation, I got several hundred hits, all of them attributing the quotation to Mark Twain (although none of them cited a source in his works). I mentally added this one to the growing list of things Mark Twain never said, but that many people think he did.

That would be the end of the story, but the spurious Twain quotation kept haunting me. I saw it cited in blogs, in advice to writers, and especially as business advice. Apparently this strange (and unsettling) quotation about eating frogs has become very widespread. And at the center, other than faux Mark Twain, is a book by motivational speaker Brian Tracy, Eat That Frog!: 21 Ways To Stop Procrastination and Get More Done in Less Time. I have not read his book, but I think this idea of eating frogs can be helpful for all of us, faculty and staff, and also students.

I suppose I am not the only person around here who is prone to procrastination from time to time. When I have a long to-do list, I get paralyzed sometimes. My natural reaction is to nibble at the edges of my list, to tackle what I can do quickest. But this advice tells me to do the hardest first, to eat the frog on my list first. And if there are two hard or distasteful tasks, tackle (eat) the hardest first.

What’s your frog? My biggest frog is grading papers. Another is writing reports. Since I have many more papers to grade than reports to write, I will focus on that frog.

I learned what a bad frog paper grading is for me my first year of teaching, a long, long time ago, in a land called the 1970s. I was fresh out of college and teaching high school English in Mooresville, NC. Four of my classes turned in research papers, all at the same time. I took them home and put them on a shelf. They sat on that shelf. A few days. A week. Two weeks. The students would ask about them. I would say, “I am working on them. I want to give them back all at the same time.”

I was lying. I had not touched the ugly and detestable frogs. I did not even like to look at the shelf they were sitting on. If I could have, I would have avoided walking into that room.

After about six weeks, and
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many student requests. I realized that the grading period was about to end and that I would have to grade those papers, about a hundred of them. When I finally got to them, I had one of the worst weekends of my life. A whole lot of frog eating!

This taught me a valuable lesson: papers are not going to grade themselves. Those darn frogs will just sit there!

Here is another lesson I learned about grading papers. I would be tackling a set of papers and come to one I knew was going to be trouble, one that would be so bad that I would have to spend a lot of time reading it just to understand it. I would move that one to the bottom of the pile. Then another bad one, bottom of the pile. Then another. The result: when I got to the end of that stack, I had four or five truly bad and hard papers to grade. Big mistake! I learned to eat the bad frogs first—or at least to take them as they came and not put them off.

Grading papers are my biggest frogs and can lead me to procrastination if I let them. But the advice in the non-Twain quote is very true: if you make yourself eat those frogs, the rest of your day will be better. And I find that an old saying of my grandmother’s is quite true of paper grading: “Once begun, half done.” Just starting, just breaking the inertia and eating that first odious frog, is enough to help me get through the job.

Maybe part of the answer is to learn to enjoy eating frogs. If I can remind myself that these papers I don’t want to face are actually the vehicle for my students’ best learning, perhaps I can motivate myself better to do the hardest part of my job.

Guess what I need to do before tomorrow’s class? That’s right, about 15 frogs. They prey on my mind, they torment me. During the summers, when I don’t have any papers to grade, I often have nightmares about a stack of them awaiting me. Just the prospect of having to tackle them makes me want to do anything else. I have gotten up from a stack of papers at my kitchen table and decided it was extremely important for me to get a stepladder and clean the top of the refrigerator!

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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.

XXITE 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.

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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!

**Thought for The Week**

“I don’t see any p’ints about that frog that’s any better’n any other frog.” —Mark Twain