Guest Column: How Gardening Made Me a Better Instructor—by David Schary, PESH

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Guest Column: How Gardening Made Me a Better Instructor—by David Schary, PESH

This year, I planted a vegetable garden for the first time. Over the hot summer months, my garden helped me reflect on my teaching and even taught me a few things that I carried into the classroom this fall. Here are some of the more interesting lessons my garden humbly taught me:

1. Gardening looks easy—but it’s not! Although I had never planted a garden in my life, I naively thought that I could put some plants in the ground and come back a few weeks later to collect my bounty of fresh vegetables. I read books and talked with friends who made gardening sound easy; how hard could it be to grow something in the ground? Nature quickly brought me back to reality, and I found out that it takes a lot of work to make sure the garden survives through the rain, wind, cold spring mornings, and hot summer days. This lesson was driven home one particular day when I found all three of my squash plants had their bases snapped by a rough and windy storm, an unfortunate event that could have been prevented had I realized that I was supposed to worry about their survival in the elements.

Teaching also appears easy, especially when you observe an experienced and passionate instructor. The night before I taught my first class as a graduate student, I distinctly remember thinking it was going to be easy. But the minute I saw students begin to write down my words as fact, I second guessed everything. Needless to say, that first class had a lot of mistakes, but I learned from them and moved on. I now appreciate how hard it is to be a good teacher.

2. Gardening takes time, a lot of time. I knew that it was going to take time for the plant to go from seedling to vegetable; however, I really underestimated how much of my time it was going to take to get the plant to go from seedling to vegetable. It took time to prepare, it took time to plant, it took time to water, it took time to weed, it took time to prune, and it took time to read what I was supposed to do next. While the amount of time I spent on my garden far exceeded my original expectations, the fruit of my labor was well worth it. I ended up with many delicious tomatoes and cucumbers.

As you know, teaching also takes time. The time it took to prepare
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for a class used to bother me. I spend at least two to three times as long to prepare a class as I spend teaching it (and I still feel I can never cover everything I plan). Grading, responding to emails, and meeting with students also take up a lot of time. But the longer I teach, the more I appreciate that my time working with and for students is always well spent. Instead of producing tomatoes and cucumbers, my time teaching produces more knowledgeable students who one day will be out making decisions in the real world. And this outcome lasts a whole lot longer than any of my vegetables.

3. Gardening is a mixture of experience, preparation, and weather (and sometimes bugs). To be honest, I feel fortunate that my garden produced anything. As I mentioned, I did get many tomatoes and cucumbers. Yet, I planted tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, and peppers. The squash died after the harsh storm, and while the pepper plants grew, they never produced anything. I noticed that the leaves on the pepper plants always had a lot of tiny holes, a mystery I still have not solved but I am pretty sure it is some sort of insect (if you have any idea please let me know). In addition, the tomato plants and cucumbers had a rough summer with me first over-watering, quickly followed by me under-watering during the hottest three weeks of July. Thus, it requires a lot of experience to have a successful garden. You need to know about soil, plants, sun, water, weeds, and bugs—all of which, as a sport psychologist, are not in my area of expertise. However, I now know what I need to study so I can be more successful next time.

Just like a garden, I have learned that teaching, particularly engaging students, requires a lot of experience to get it right. Being an expert in your subject is not enough. You need to know effective communication and presentation skills, how to relate to each student, and knowing how to ask the right questions at the right time. All these things take time to learn, and I am by no means a master. But just like my gardening skills, I know where my weaknesses are, and I am working like crazy to strengthen each one.

My garden’s successes and failures made me think a lot about my teaching. Yet, gardening is by no means the only outside activity that can help improve your teaching. I challenge you to think of a hobby or activity you enjoy and apply the lessons learned back to the classroom. You will be surprised what you find out about yourself.
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.

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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!

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The 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Save the date! Saturday, February 6, 2016 we will have our 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning. The call for papers and sessions will be issued soon. Stay tuned, and mark that date on your calendar!

Thought For the Week

“He was a very inferior farmer when he first began, but a prolonged and unflinching assault upon his agricultural difficulties has had its effect at last and he is now fast rising from affluence to poverty.”

--Mark Twain