Whitewashing the Fence, Turning Work Into Play, Making Teaching and Learning Interesting and Engaging

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Teaching and Learning Center

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We just got through reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in my Mark Twain graduate seminar the other night. *Tom Sawyer* is one of those books that people know about even if they have never read it. The fence whitewashing scene, Tom and Huck attending their own funeral, and Tom and Becky lost in the cave are iconic moments that have become part of the American myth.

(As an aside, if you have never read it, or if you read it when you were young, I highly recommend that you read it or read it again. One of the best books ever written about childhood and childhood psychology, in my opinion.)

After Tom tricks his friends into whitewashing the fence for him, one of the first incidents in the novel, the narrator makes this comment: "If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do," Twain is making fun of himself with "great and wise philosopher," but he actually did become one, although that is often obscured by his brilliant humor. I have been thinking how applicable this idea is to teaching and learning.

In the novel, school is one of the tortures that Tom Sawyer endures. His teacher, Mr. Dobbins, is detached, bored, and boring, and he is handy with his hickory stick, quick to mete out severe corporal punishment. No wonder that Tom and his friends play hooky at every opportunity, finding a trip to the swimming hole much more inviting than rote memorization and recitation.

This characterization in the novel may seem extreme, but American education often contains some of the same elements—minus corporal punishment, which sadly for me was still in effect during my school days. How many teachers see teaching as what Twain called "Work," and how many students see learning the same way?

Planning, preparing for classes, lecturing, leading class discussion, grading tests and papers—Work! And for the students, reading assignments, doing worksheets, coming to class day after day, studying for tests, writing papers—Work!

The key is to figure out how to turn Work into Play. We do not have to resort to subterfuge the way Tom Sawyer did. But we do have to work a bit to accomplish the switch.

As I was preparing to become a teacher, nearly 40 years ago, one of the vows I made was that I would try never to bore my students, unless it was completely necessary. That meant finding ways to teach grammar, for example, in a way that was interesting and entertaining. (Grammar Rock provided me a good model for that. Sing it with
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me: “Conjunction junction, what’s your function?”

As teachers, we can choose to do the same thing, over and over, because we think it is most efficient. If it engages students, fine. But if they are bored, passive, detached recipients of all our content, what’s the point?

It does take work to plan lessons and assignments that are interesting, engaging, and, dare I say it, fun. But it is worth it, for the teacher and for the students. I don’t have the longest attention span in the world, but I am sure mine is longer than most of our students. What magic there is in the classroom when you and the students are so into the topic that you are all surprised, even disappointed, when time comes for the class to end.

But it takes more than just planning to turn teaching and learning from Work into Play. It takes attitude.

I can’t count the number of times I have dreaded walking into yet another class, especially when it is a class I have taught over and over. I would truly love to be anywhere else, doing anything else. But then something magic happens when I get into class and we start. I feel the power and interest of that tired old subject again, and I sense my students’ interest and excitement. I get into it, and my attitude changes. Voila! Work turns into Play, for me, for my students. They get into it as much as I do. Excitement about learning is highly contagious.

As I visit classes for teaching consultations, I see this happening all over campus, in all sorts of classes. Even when I don’t know anything about the subject matter, a math lesson or ballet moves or advanced biology, I get excited about learning too.

In the novel, Tom Sawyer is rewarded when his friends pay him to do his work, paid with boyhood treasures like marbles and a kitten with one eye. After she sees his “work,” Aunt Polly rewards him with a doughnut, telling him she is glad he has learned the value of hard work. Twain’s point is full of irony, but it is also full of truth. Turning Work into Play is one of the surest ways that teaching and learning can be more successful and fulfilling, for us, for our students.

Only a month remains before the deadline for proposals for the 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning. The conference will be held on campus Saturday, February 6, 2015, from 9:00 am to 5:30 pm. We will have interesting and engaging sessions all day, with a sit-down luncheon and a keynote address by Dr. Dan Mahony.

Attendance and participation has grown each year, from 80+ the first year to around 120 last year. We expect even more growth this year as the conference gets more established and as we reach out to a wider audience of area colleges and universities.

Last year’s sessions covered a variety of topics, including new technologies, flipped classrooms, critical thinking, global learning, study abroad, academic publishing, undergraduate research, and innovative pedagogical strategies, among many others.

As I said, the deadline for proposals is November 16, just a month away. We urge you to submit your ideas for what we know will be an interesting and stimulating conference. You will find the submission form at the TLC website:

http://www.winthrop.edu/tlc
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.

Thought For the Week

“Piloting on the Mississippi River was not work to me; it was play—delightful play, vigorous play, adventurous play—and I loved it.”

--Mark Twain