




1998

Tales Out of School: Six Secrets from Successful Teachers

John Strassburger
Ursinus College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/president_pub

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Strassburger, John, "Tales Out of School: Six Secrets from Successful Teachers" (1998). *Publications*. 3.
https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/president_pub/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the President's Office at Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. For more information, please contact aprock@ursinus.edu.

TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

SIX SECRETS

from

SUCCESSFUL

TEACHERS

Third in a series

of occasional papers from

John Strassburger, President

URSINUS COLLEGE



Something is terribly right with American education. The essence of that something is captured in an evaluation an Ursinus student wrote about one of her professors who had been nominated for a teaching award. His impact, she said, far exceeded the knowledge she had gained or the skills she had developed. He had transformed her sense of herself, instilling purpose where there had been doubt, distilling vague dreams into concrete goals. She struggled in her letter to articulate all that had happened in his classes, but she came to it in the end: "I haven't found an adjective to describe someone who teaches you how to be a better person."

What's right about American higher education is teaching — and the men and women who do it. With the challenges today's students will have to face, they need their teachers to be, as Newton put it, giants on whose shoulders they stand in order to see further, rather than Goliaths they have to dispose of in order to see daylight. When I look at the caliber of the work of students on this campus — and not only honors students — it's clear that faculty are doing far more than building competence. They are helping students become self-reliant and responsible. This transforming power of college teaching makes liberal arts colleges — the places where the most intensive teaching is done — among the most exciting places in America.

How is this happening? Recently, our dean of faculty, Judith Levy, and I brought together several groups of Ursinus faculty to find out from them what works in the classroom. Since most of them had won teaching awards and professional honors, I expected we would come

up with a list of innovations to share with the world. Instead, the conversation was all about our students — who they are, how they think, what they need to succeed. It was rich in anecdotes of transformation but short on precepts. Stepping back, though, I realized the conditions for innovation were there in abundance, and real, dramatic changes were happening without fanfare. The people who teach in colleges like ours have learned some important lessons about how to transform young people's lives. Here are the ones our faculty and students taught me:



LESSON 1:
TEACH AS IF THEIR
LIVES DEPENDED ON IT

One of our faculty members asked Dean Levy point-blank, “Why did you hire me?” Dean Levy is the product of both a small college and a major research university, Johns Hopkins. She answered, “When I watched you teach, you thought about the people you were talking to and you talked to them. It’s the difference between assuming only three people will ‘get it’ and believing in the ability of all the students to ‘get it.’”

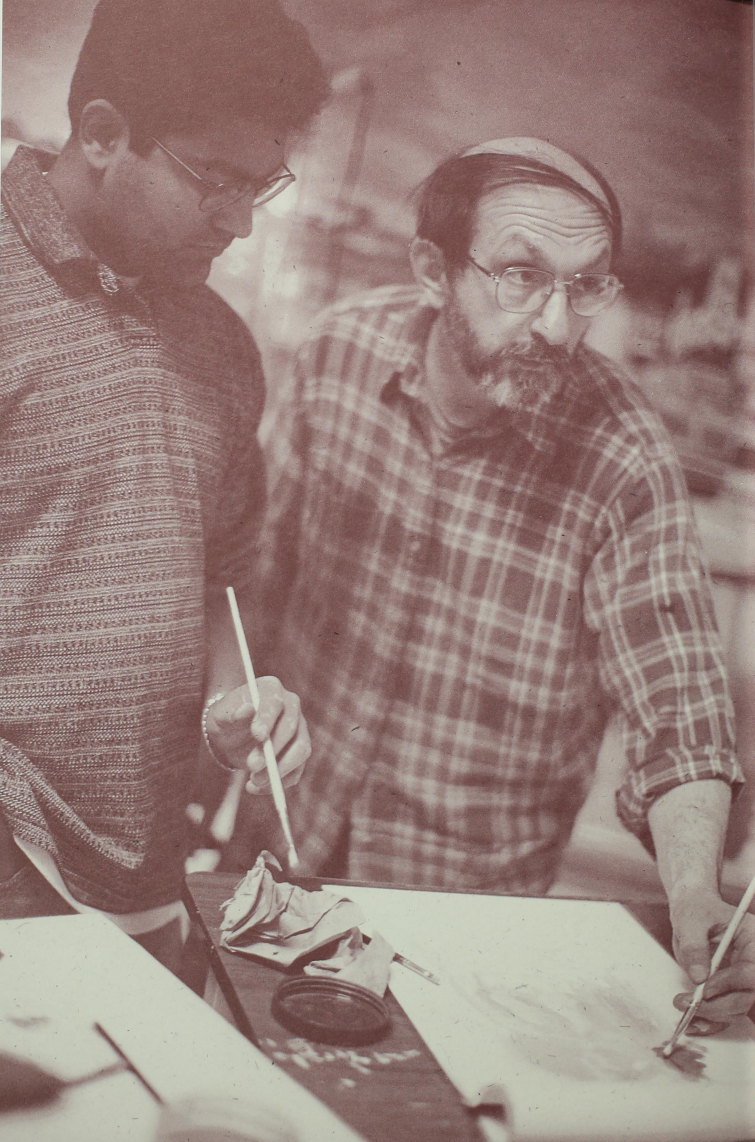
Liberal arts colleges are not just in the information business. They are in the transformation business. If we have one overarching goal, it seems to me, it is to guide students toward self-reliance and responsibility. Who they are and what they do have an impact, and that gives them opportunities they never dreamed of. Good teachers begin by

acknowledging this self- and world-making power. And as students discover that “who they are” is something they make by acting in the world, their own motivation for learning takes over.

To get this result, we hire people who see their success as professionals bound directly to the outcome of the process, student achievement. They have what Dean Levy calls “a mixture of confidence and humility.” Their goals, ideas and practices are constantly modified by contact with these young, aspiring, uncertain, optimistic human beings. When a college is ambitious for its students — and that ambition is supported by tenure and budget decisions — everything changes. A culture of teaching flourishes.

The superb equipment in our chemistry department has helped our students prepare for the best graduate and medical schools, but according to Professor Victor Tortorelli, who has helped build the department’s excellence, each purchase had to meet a test: “Can students learn to use it quickly and begin getting results?” In renovating our science facilities, we had a chance to enhance faculty research capabilities. Instead, we built teaching labs, where faculty and students work near each other. “I don’t have my own lab, as I would in a university,” says Professor Tortorelli. “We have shared research labs and we learn from each other.” When the department began to move toward student research and hands-on learning more than a decade ago, the faculty changed the sequence of the curriculum to give students the skills to be productive early and begin to develop a sense of mastery.

We are finding that more and more faculty, both tenured and new, want a culture of teaching and wouldn’t give it up for a university position with fewer classroom responsibilities. For Dallett Hemphill, a professor of history, this culture offers the chance to “see young



people become adults before my eyes.” For professor of psychology Catherine Chambliss, it provides an opportunity to replace the model of student apprenticeship with one of student *ownership*. Almost all the papers she publishes in scholarly journals bear the names of her students. They don’t have to wait until graduate school to make meaningful contributions.

When faculty are fully invested in their students’ success, the traditional split between teaching and discovery begins to vanish. Indeed, that’s why gifted faculty choose colleges like Ursinus. Art historian Pamela Potter-Hennessey, one of our newest faculty members, came to Ursinus with graduate degrees from Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland. We couldn’t offer her the archival resources or specialized expertise of a major research university, but we could offer her a small museum perfectly suited for teaching and a high-quality art collection for “hands-on” learning. She sees this as an ideal situation, for she believes students’ ideas and discoveries are the key to moving our program into new territory. Says Professor Potter-Hennessey, “We will be creating something together, and I can’t wait to see what we accomplish.”



LESSON 2: LET THEM SEE YOU SWEAT

Peter Jessup, the chairman of our mathematics and computer science department, is an outstanding theoretical mathematician, and like

many of his generation, he studied and contributed to computer science as the discipline was emerging. He is also a teacher with the rare ability to awaken students to the beauty of mathematics and the excitement of technology. One way he does that is to show them how he grapples with new ideas. "I write all my programs on the fly," he says, "in front of my students, so they can see that we are all engaged in the same kind of hard work."

The most compelling reason to have active scholars teaching is not to keep students up to date but to show them that knowledge is more than received opinion. They see this most vividly at a liberal arts college, because the struggle to understand takes place at the center of the classroom.

At Ursinus, there isn't enough time for faculty to make the struggle invisible — to pursue one life in the classroom and another in the study. Students must be their top priority. At the same time, the library of specialized material they must master grows exponentially, and changing technology keeps them hurrying just to stay abreast. To complicate matters, biologists, literary critics, historians and economists are being challenged by new paradigms in their fields. They must find ways to bring their world and the world of students together. This doesn't mean research has to demonstrate obvious "relevance." (To whom?) Professor Paul Stern teaches Greek political philosophy, an area where he has gained national recognition but not one that students are likely to know. "We read strange and difficult books in my classes," he says, but the questions his learning enables him to tackle go to the heart of the human experience of justice and freedom. "How I teach grows directly out of what I am thinking about," he adds. "In order for discussion to happen, there must be something students yearn to possess."

If knowledge and mastery are what students yearn to possess, they also learn about courage as they confront new ideas. In our honors colloquium, students and faculty from a variety of disciplines meet each week to consider topics that cross boundaries. In one session, they were discussing Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, a book that takes a critical look at the idea of scientific progress. One of the students, a chemistry major, had already been trying to come to terms with the possible conflict between science and her religious faith, and now science's claim to truth seemed also about to be undermined. Her expression of profound unease was like a lightning rod for her classmates, who rallied around her.

The faculty in the room understood what it feels like to have cherished beliefs challenged. It happens to them all the time. They handled this situation with a delicacy that can come only from having been there — neither pushing forward until all certainty collapsed nor pretending the conflicts were just a bad dream. At the same time, I wondered if the students could tell how much we admired them for their willingness to go where their ideas led them.

We emphasize student research at Ursinus because it builds self-reliance and gives weight and content to thought. Yet as the above example shows, students are also seeking models in the transition to adulthood, and scholarship at its best provides a strong one. Our faculty constantly stress the details of discovery because that is where integrity and respect reside. Virtue needs a context. Professor Catherine Chambliss regularly shows her students the comments journal editors write on her papers, and many other faculty share their work and ask for student comments. Students seldom forget the moment they were first addressed as colleagues. Professor Potter-Hennessey

has another approach. She runs a contest to see who can find the best footnote. “It’s in footnotes where arguments live and die — and where students discover whether an author can be trusted,” she says. “They don’t have to take it on faith.” The contest is very popular. Professor Annette Lucas runs a similar contest. When her students read nineteenth-century French literature, she always has them identify what they see as telling sentences. Their readings of a work, she reports, now inform hers.

One image captures the essence of what students gain in the contact with active scholars. A laboratory notebook lies open on a lab bench. It is the most basic tool of the scientist. New entries have just been written in, the latest data logged. Later will come the tough job of determining whether a beautiful hypothesis can stand up to messy reality. The commitment to a daily discipline has just been reaffirmed — and something more. Says Dean Judith Levy, herself a biochemist, “This fidelity to each observation or result, minute by minute, is the building block of lasting contributions. Reality can’t be faked. With each entry, you hold yourself accountable to your peers and to truth. When everyone around you adheres to the same high standards, integrity becomes a habit.”



LESSON 3: ADMIT ANXIETY

Professor Dallett Hemphill's forthcoming book with Oxford University Press, *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America*, puts her on the cutting edge of American history, where gender and family studies are enlarging our sense of what it has meant to be an American. But she is also a challenged teacher, and she is not alone. "Teaching is harder now than ever," she says. "I'm often scared to death." The world within the classroom is changing, and this very uncertainty is provoking creative responses that stimulate learning.

Faculty across the country were realizing that, in the words of professor of English and communication arts Joyce Henry, "in order to be effective, we had to be more interactive, more creative." The challenge is not that television and nonlinear media have undermined students' capacity to think sequentially. The work our students produce demonstrates that they are as well equipped to order their thoughts as ever. The real challenge comes from the fact that they need to do more in a classroom than just listen. In an information-rich world, students look to teachers to help them understand *how* to develop, use and evaluate information. These models can only be learned — and taught — actively.

For Professor Hemphill, the first step toward active learning was to "ask students to share the risk" of learning how to learn. She began to shift basic decisions to them, including how the discussion that traditionally opens each of her classes would begin. Students had to ask themselves what they needed to explore in class discussion. The results have been invigorating. Professor of English Patricia

Schroeder, herself an Ursinus graduate, followed a similar path. "It took me ten years to figure out how to teach Whitman's *Song of Myself*," she remarks. "I divided up the voices of the poem among groups of students and let them reconstruct it." To manage such discussions, she has to be better prepared than ever. "I do most of my teaching before I ever get to class."

Watching students use the Internet convinced assistant professor of modern languages Juan-Ramón de Arana that the computer could be an effective tool to overcome the age-old hurdle of rote repetition in learning languages. With support from a Mellon Foundation grant, shared by Ursinus and Lafayette College, and the technical assistance of an Ursinus computer science major, Simon Rak, Professor de Arana has created model Web forms for routine activities like quizzes and grammar exercises. Now they are anything but routine. These sessions offer students twenty-four-hour accessibility and immediate feedback and explanation. On the Web, Professor de Arana can also ask questions in ways that better evaluate what students understand. Not only Ursinus students, but tens of thousands of users around the world have logged onto the site. Many have asked how they can purchase the entire Spanish "course"!

Professor de Arana also uses the Web to share and critique writing, and it is in writing, above all, where the trend toward risk taking and interactivity has had the greatest impact. Recently, we did an informal faculty survey and found that not only are Ursinus students writing more than they did twenty years ago, but they are also writing more often. Lectures and standardized tests are on the wane, replaced by discussions and essay exams, even in the sciences and mathematics. Multiple drafts, usually shared with the class for comment (often



via the Internet), are the norm. Says professor of English Joyce Lionarons, “Students want responses to their work. They want to improve, and they are willing to give up the relative safety of writing just for a professor in order to gain more feedback.”

Professor Catherine Chambliss has taken the writing process one step further into the world. Most students probably won’t write essays once they leave Ursinus, but they will write reports, manuals, proposals, memos and a host of other communications. Professor Chambliss asks her students to work in these forms, mastering their rules and preparing to reach audiences beyond the classroom — as she does. When her students graduate, they carry a portfolio of work that speaks clearly about their capabilities.

Interactive learning holds out the promise not just of student transformation but of faculty transformation as well. Working with Ursinus students over two decades and responding to their emerging interests, professor of English Peter Perreten began to explore entirely new subjects that renewed him as a scholar and teacher. “Most of what I studied in graduate school is out the window, and the world didn’t need another conventional scholar.” Professor Perreten has devised a series of courses in the literature of nature and ecology, a discipline just beginning to be taught on many college campuses.



LESSON 4:
ASSUME THE BEST,
RATHER THAN PREPARE FOR THE WORST

Theodore Xaras has taught studio art at Ursinus for more than twenty years. A professional artist, he has helped make Ursinus an increasingly important home for the arts. Ursinus doesn't offer a major in studio art, and many students take his courses primarily to explore a world they want to know better. Most have little idea of what they can accomplish, but Professor Xaras knows how to help them discover it. One day, after a frustrating attempt to paint the hand of a figure in a picture he was working on, he called in a student from the next studio. He handed her his brush and said, "Here, you take a crack at it." She was shocked, but he reassured her. "Da Vinci did it for his teacher Verrocchio — and did it better."

Professor Xaras knows that students need to get beyond the fear of failure in order to achieve, and the best way to move them there is to give them something important to do. It doesn't even have to be immediately useful to them, as long as they can see it is important. Risk taking is not an abstract virtue. The only reason we take a risk is for something we value. Students, who have been evaluated most of their lives, naturally want to focus on outcomes and grades. We want them to learn a process of thinking and "see the merit in the doing," as Dean Levy puts it so well. The way to unite the two ambitions is through goals students can invest in. This idea of owning your education may seem self-evident, but in practice it is changing the character of our campus.

In an indirect way, students were telling us that they wanted ownership when they began to take on more and more community service projects. The number of these projects on campus has quadrupled in the last five years. Students are willing to face almost any challenge, master new disciplines and work hard because the goal is meaningful and personal. No letter grade could convince them to give up their vacation to pile into a car and drive hundreds of miles in order to rebuild housing for people they had never met, as one group did last year. We have applied this lesson about motivation to academic life through student research projects.

We now ask all our students to engage in an academic or artistic project they design and conduct. With funding from foundations and alumni, many are able to spend summers in the laboratory with faculty. Indeed, an increasing number of the grants our faculty receive resemble the one awarded to assistant professor of chemistry Holly Gaede by the National Science Foundation for nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy, because the instrument will be used by students working with her. Professor of biology James Sidie takes a contingent of students to the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole nearly every summer. Other faculty conduct seminars on rain-forest ecology in Costa Rica. They have pioneered these innovative but labor-intensive programs for a reason: In Professor Sidie's words, "There is a difference between asking students to learn science and to be scientists — or writers or historians."

It's the difference between waiting for adulthood to begin and actually being an adult. We emphasize the connection of research to the world by encouraging students to publish their work and present it in public. Every year hundreds of our students make presentations at

student research colloquia, professional conferences and regional academic meetings. It goes without saying that when they take the podium, faculty members are either at their side as colleagues and co-presenters or in the audience. Often it's not until students see their toughest critics applauding that they realize what they have accomplished.



LESSON 5: LET SOMEBODY ELSE DO IT

A few years ago, several Ursinus students began an unusual research project. They wanted to find out if public and private programs that promised to help parents improve their child-rearing skills really worked. So they devised a study. It was difficult to set up and even harder to convince directors of the programs to cooperate. Just as the students were beginning to gather intriguing data, it was time for some of them to graduate. So the senior students recruited a new group to help carry on. The project was sustained for three different classes of student researchers.

The most powerful untapped force for student achievement is the sense of responsibility young people have for each other. Professor of English and communications arts Joyce Henry, who directs our theatre and has worked for many years with repertory companies, believes firmly that actors learn this lesson quickly. She puts it this way: "Lady MacBeth can't say to the rest of the cast, 'I have a headache tonight.'" The professor directing the group research project knew that once the students developed a shared commitment to each other, she would never have to tell them what needed to be done.

More and more of our classes are developing collaborative components. Theatre would seem to be a natural area for group work. Mathematics wouldn't, and yet Professor Nancy Hagelgans has introduced group learning in calculus — so successfully, in fact, that she and colleagues at several other institutions have published a book on it for the Mathematical Association of America, *A Practical Guide to Cooperative Learning in Collegiate Mathematics*. Our business and economics program has taken a page from the most successful professional schools and made team projects the linchpin of hands-on learning.

If we expect 100 percent of our students to do some form of independent work, group projects are a practical necessity. Yet they may also be the way to teach certain ideals that an individual professor can't. The students who recruited others to take over their research project were not only committed to a job well done. They also wanted to ensure the continuity of a group with a common, worthwhile goal. They had built a community of values, and they wanted it to outlast them. They were beginning to do the work of citizenship.





LESSON 6:
READ BETWEEN THE LINES

Professor Peter Jessup thought a lot about the student in his computer science class. Her grades indicated that she might be better off in another field. Her quantitative skills were so-so and she hated to memorize. But he knew something about the student that she didn't know: "She was a 'people' person in a nerd's business," he says. He encouraged her to put those talents to work. She organized her own computing seminar for nine other Ursinus students. Now she has a job in network systems as a user support professional.

Faculty at liberal arts colleges can be agents of transformation because they don't stop thinking about students once class is over. Like Professor Jessup, they ask not only what does this student need to know, but how can this student succeed? To answer, they have to know who students are and, often, to read between the lines. Professor of English Margot Kelley knows that many of her students work during term time, and she makes it her business to know when — because the time of day they study may have as much to do with their success as how capable they are. As she remarks, "I know all the mechanisms that prevent students from being their best selves." She also knows what motivates them. Many of her students take several courses with her over four years, so she sees how they think. She also talks to other faculty. She can recognize when her students propose topics that touch what they care about. If they don't, she often sends them back to the drawing board.

Students come to college with tremendously high expectations for themselves and an intense sense of responsibility for making their edu-

cation pay off. In order to make sure that they get the most out of the experience, we must defend their freedom to discover what they care about, even if that discovery flies in the face of the way parents, family and friends see them. Or the way they initially see themselves. Small colleges are best prepared to do that. To lengthen students' strides toward independence, Ursinus has placed strong emphasis on the first year, especially first-year advising. We asked one of our most experienced faculty members, professor of modern languages Annette Lucas, to be dean of first-year students. She was already instrumental in the creation of our first-year seminars, which are entirely discussion based. She says, "Our goal is to create a free space of inquiry, where every question that matters can be asked. We enable students to be students, so they can then become adults."

Teachers don't need special pleading to keep teaching after the students have gone. But the real poignancy of a job where you invest so much of yourself at every moment and where the stakes are so high is that you may never fully know when you succeed. The great reward of teaching at a liberal arts college is that the chances of discovering how well you've succeeded are so high. The very people you have been thinking about have been thinking about you, and they haven't stopped learning after the professor has gone.

When Professor Hemphill finished the manuscript of her new book, the first person she sent it to was not an editor at a publishing house. It was an Ursinus graduate she had taught five years before. "This student really understands how I think," she says. "That's why keeping in touch has been so important. It's not personal but intellectual: a student grows up, becomes a colleague and extends the community of learning. This is what teaching is all about."

ABOUT THE SERIES



THIS IS THE THIRD in a series of occasional papers about the challenges confronting students and what Ursinus is doing to help them enter adult life.

For additional copies of this paper, contact:

Office of the President

Ursinus College

PO Box 1000

Collegeville, PA 19426-1000

Telephone (610) 409-3587 or fax (610) 409-3642



