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The Best Teacher Ever

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Teaching and Learning Center

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The Weekly Reader

Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

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The Best Teacher Ever

Who immediately comes to your mind when I ask, "Who was your best teacher ever?"

I posed that question at the New Faculty breakfast a few weeks ago. I had them share the answer with their neighbors. (I was heartened that nearly half of their "best teachers ever" were college faculty—I had expected just one or two.) Then I had them write down four or five adjectives that described their best teacher. Here are some of the adjectives: inspiring, charismatic, challenging, thought-provoking, and amazing. Here are a few more: prepared, disciplined, respectful, and nurturing.

I divided these adjectives into groups, partly because they came out that way, but also because I think the two groups prove some points. I am not sure that all of us can live up to those superlatives in the first group. It takes a very special person to inspire or to be amazing. (But I also know that we have many such special teachers on this campus!) It's that second grouping that caught my attention. We may not all be able to be scintillating superstars, but I think we can all exceed in the second category. With work, even folks like me can be well-prepared. We should be able to exhibit discipline, with our

students, with our courses, and with ourselves. We should surely all strive to be respectful. And nurturing is as key to teaching as it is to parenting—or gardening. The adjectives in that first list might come largely from natural talent, affinity, and personality, but the adjectives in the second list come largely from work and attention.

We may not be that person who immediately comes to a student's mind when she answers the question "Who was your best teacher ever?" But with some work and attention, we might be up there near the top of the list. A good thing to strive for.

Academic Responsibility ---- Office Hours

Last spring, we adopted new guidelines that grew out of the Faculty Roles and Rewards Taskforce, a document entitled "Faculty Roles"; I would like to take this space for a few weeks to start a discussion about some aspects of one part of that document, academic responsibility.

Last week was about final exams. This week: office hours.

The Faculty Roles document cites one academic responsibility as "availability to students," including office hours. The Faculty Manual makes this

statement about office hours: "Faculty members are required to maintain office hours and to post the hours on their respective office doors. Office hours shall be reported to the department chair and to the dean. While the number of office hours

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required is not fixed, it is assumed that each faculty member will maintain office hours each day which will be convenient and adequate for the students to arrange conferences pertaining to their work.”

“It is assumed”—that is the tricky part.

I had a colleague at a previous institution who posted her office “hours” as 5:00-6:00 Friday afternoon. At that college, even more of a suitcase college than Winthrop is, she might as well have posted them at 5:00-6:00 AM. When I did a Google search for office hour policies around the country, I noticed extremes: Northwestern University requires eight hours of office hours per week; San Jose State requires two hours per week. Most universities are like Winthrop and do not set a specific number: Western Kentucky says the hours should be “appropriate,” and Illinois State says they should be “reasonable.”

How to read our guidelines? Does this

really mean that I must hold office hours “each day”? (I do not, and I don’t think I ever have since I came here in 1993). I dimly remember someone in authority suggesting that I hold two office hours for each class I teach. I think I have held to that at a minimum, but I am not sure. The number of hours that I post varies, and I always add “or by appointment,” and I strive to meet students at times that suit them, as much as I can.

One huge change that has happened over the last few years does not seem to be reflected in university policy: the growing availability of electronic “office hours.” With email, Facebook, and Twitter, I can have virtual office hours at home in my pajamas if I want to—as long as no cameras are involved. I have held virtual office hours through Blackboard, which works very well. Maybe it is time for us to revisit the faculty manual and find a way to incorporate these technological changes.

That raises an issue at the other extreme: being

available to students ALL the time. That can be a problem too...just part of the conversation we will continue to have about academic responsibility.

Final exam update: I was prepared for a barrage of criticism after last week’s rant on final exams, but I only heard a few comments. Several people said they see the same problem and agreed with me. One colleague recalled a time in the late 90s when a student went to the dean to complain that this faculty member’s section of the course was the only one that required a final exam, which made the student stay on campus longer than anyone else. One person rightly pointed out that the rooms could be empty because the exam is being given through Blackboard. (Quite true: although the empty rooms pre-date Blackboard.) Another person mentioned rigorous take-home exams. (Our policies do not mention take-home exams as permissible, but many of us go this route.) I am glad to have initiated this conversation, and I hope it will continue in a number of venues.

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.

Tomorrow's Professor

Here is a link to a recent article at Tomorrow's Professor, "The Role of Student Evaluations in Tenure and Promotion":

<http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/posting.php?ID=1170>

You can subscribe to Tomorrow's Professor and receive interesting articles about teaching and academia every week:

<http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/postings.php>

Join XXITE 2.0 or
Register for a TLC
Session

At

www.winthrop.edu/tlc

Thought for The Week

"You may have noticed that the less I know about a subject, the more confidence I have, and the more new light I throw on it."
--Mark Twain