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# Changing Lives, Having Your Own Life Changed: Reflections on Forty Years as a Teacher

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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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## Changing Lives, Having Your Own Life Changed: Reflections on Forty Years as a Teacher

For the last few months, people around campus have been asking me if I am counting the days until I retire. I honestly said no, that I was just trying to get through today and this week. But as the calendar moves into April, the days get short enough to count, and it is hard not to look ahead.

But I am also looking back. I hope I can be forgiven for writing about my teaching career again. I have been reflecting on the past lately, thinking about what my varied teaching history has taught me.

As I wrote last week, I first stepped into a classroom as a teacher 40 years ago, and my first job was teaching high school English. As I said, in many ways, this job was the most challenging and rewarding of my career. A funny thing happened my second year: I became a Spanish teacher!

There was a problem with the Spanish teacher at that high school, and she had to leave, not in the

best of circumstances. The principal, Larry Edwards, was frantically trying to find somebody to teach three levels of Spanish. He looked at my college transcripts and saw that I had taken nearly enough Spanish to major in it. In fact, I had taken Spanish since the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and I was good at it. He asked me if I would step in and teach Spanish too.

I did, and although it was a huge challenge, I learned more Spanish that year than in all my years of classes. That taught me early on the valuable lesson that the teacher is the one who learns the most. That really stuck with me and began to inform my teaching: how could I find ways to allow the *students* to be the teacher?

A couple of years as a teaching assistant in my MA program at Appalachian let me ease into college-level teaching, composition and introduction to literature. Graduate school teaching

is an interesting hybrid: you are a teacher, but you are a student at the same time. I began very consciously studying my professors, trying to model the ones who were really good, and trying to avoid what I saw were problems with some of the others.

I did the same kind of teaching in my PhD program at the University of Rochester, but I had to adapt to a new environment. Those years in snowy and dreary Rochester marked the first time I had lived outside the South, and I experienced a bit of culture shock. But I found that students were pretty much the same all over, even if they had funny accents, and even if, for some strange reason, they thought my accent was funny.

I had three other teaching experiences during my years in Rochester. While I was working on my dissertation, I took a job teaching, of all things, 7<sup>th</sup> grade English. When I tell people that, they react in horror, but this was

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*But here is the great secret about being a teacher: each of them changed my life, even more. What a wonderful life! (Mostly...)”*



## Continued from page 1

(mostly) a great experience. The kids in that suburb of Rochester, Brighton, were very smart; many of them later attended Ivy League colleges. I learned a great deal about adjusting my teaching and my expectations, and I really grew as a teacher that year.

The next year, my dissertation almost done, I got a one-year teaching job at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, replacing a faculty member who was on a Fulbright. My time at a huge Research One university provided me with more learning about how to be a teacher. I taught graduate classes for the first time, even though I was myself still a grad student. I got to teach upper-division majors in 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century American literature, my main areas of study.

But what really stretched me was the required intro to lit classes, with 300-400 students. Twice a week, I took the stage in a huge auditorium and held forth about everything from Shakespeare to Jane Austen to Emily Dickinson to Kurt Vonnegut. Grad students served as TA's, meeting with the students in discussion groups, grading their papers. Rock

star time! I used to walk the beautiful streets of Madison and have students I had never seen before stop me and tell me I was their professor, and that they loved my class. What an adjustment that teaching experience was.

The next year brought new challenges. I finished my dissertation and got my PhD, but in the dark days of the mid-1980s, academic jobs were scarce. Like many others, I became a gypsy scholar at two very different institutions: I taught some classes at Monroe Community College, mainly teaching composition to culinary students, and I taught half-time at the Eastman School of Music. The culinary students were working class, tattooed, and gritty, and the music students were already among the best musicians in the world. (I used to sit in my office with the door open and listen to the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra practice.) I learned even more flexibility that year.

My first real job brought me, unexpectedly, back to the Carolinas. I really loved teaching at Converse College in Spartanburg. There were only 700 students or so, and I knew nearly every

one of them, the exact opposite of my experience at Wisconsin. I learned how to tone myself down, to listen to their quieter voices, to absorb myself in women's ways of knowing (the title of an important book I read during that time). I could have imagined staying there forever. But I had to leave.

When I started at Winthrop in 1993, it felt much like Converse: the campus had the same women's college architecture, and the student population was predominantly female. It was a bit of an adjustment to teach guys again, but I found that my time at Converse had changed me as a teacher, for the better.

Looking back, I see how all those early teaching challenges prepared me for the bulk of my career, which has been at Winthrop. Every different situation changed me, molded me, taught me. I think of the thousands of students I have encountered these past 40 years, many of whom have told me I changed their lives.

But here is the great secret about being a teacher: each of them changed my life, even more. What a wonderful life! (Mostly...)

## 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](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu).

## Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

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 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!

Register for a TLC Session  
At  
[www.winthrop.edu/tlc](http://www.winthrop.edu/tlc)

## Calls for Proposals for Teaching and Learning Conferences

South Carolina Conference on Innovations in Teaching and Learning, Charleston, SC, July 14, 2017. Deadline for proposals is April 14. [muscd.edu/sccitl](http://muscd.edu/sccitl)

Elon University's 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Teaching and Learning Conference, August 17, 2017. Deadline for proposals is April 18. <http://blogs.elon.edu/tlc2017/>

## Thought For the Week

"Every time you stop a school, you will have to build a jail. What you gain at one end you lose at the other. It's like feeding a dog on his own tail. It won't fatten the dog."  
--Mark Twain