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Coming to the End, This Time for Good: Reflections on Forty Years of Teaching and Learning

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Teaching and Learning Center

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Winthrop University

Coming to the End, This Time for Good: Reflections on Forty Years of Teaching and Learning

When the calendar turns to April, the end is fast approaching. Even though there is much left to do, students—and faculty and staff—can't help but start counting down the days until the end of another academic year.

This year, the end holds special meaning for me. This year, the end really is the end. After 40 years of teaching, I have decided to retire at the end of this academic year.

I realized in January that I first stood in front of a classroom as a teacher in 1977. Except for the first year of my PhD program, I have taught every year since. And now the end is near.

That first teaching moment was a memorable one. I was in my last semester of college at Appalachian State, beginning my student teaching. In those days, you didn't get any teaching experience until student teaching, which was in your final semester. Not a very good idea—many people made

it that far, only to realize that teaching was not for them. Happily, things have changed, and prospective teachers now have many opportunities to teach before they get to the end.

On the first day, a cold January day, I was sitting in back of the class, observing, as I was supposed to do for the first few weeks, when a disturbance happened in the hall. My master teacher ran toward me, handed me a grammar book, headed out the door, and yelled back at me, "Teach!"

A bit stunned, I walked to the front of the class, opened the book, and continued the lesson on adverbs and adjectives. Rather than abject terror, I felt totally at peace. At that moment, I knew I could be a teacher. That 23-year-old kid had no idea what the future would bring, but he knew at least that he had stumbled on the right profession.

I would like to say that teaching, which came

naturally to me, has always been that easy. It has been good, mostly, but I have had many challenges over these 40 years. The fall of 1977 gave me perhaps my biggest challenge, my first year with my own classroom.

I struggled to find a full-time job, but late that summer, I stumbled into a job at Mooresville Senior High. Back then, Mooresville was not the upscale bedroom community to Charlotte that it is now. Back then, it was a sleepy mill town, seemingly a thousand miles from Charlotte. Many of the students knew they would have a job in the hosiery mill, just like their mothers and fathers and grandparents before them. The smarter kids went off to college and never came back. The racial divide between white and black was a deep gulf, even though they were mostly in the same economic lower class.

I vividly remember one day that fall. I closed the

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I have been honored for the past few years to direct Winthrop’s Teaching and Learning Center. It has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career, and it has humbled me to see the talents of our faculty.”



Continued from page 1

door after my seventh period class, huddled myself in a corner far from the door, and wept uncontrollably. I felt lost and alone, and I was sure I had no idea whatsoever how to teach. It was a low moment of self-doubt, a moment that most first-time teachers experience.

Rather than quit, I faced my problem: learning how to discipline kids who were only a few years younger than I was, and many of them more experienced in the ways of the world than I was. I found my stride and began a journey that has lasted these 40 years. In many ways, those first two years of teaching were the most rewarding of my career. Lighting a spark in kids who had been turned off by school, rekindling a flame extinguished by an environment that told these kids life only meant 40 hours a week in a dead end job, exhilarated me as much or more than it did them. I have had more than one of them tell me I changed their lives. How exciting and humbling it is to be a teacher!

After two years there, I went back to Appalachian to get an MA, then on to the University of Rochester for a PhD. But I have always been glad I had those two years of teaching high school, my

training by fire. I learned so much about how to be a teacher, on the fly, because I had to.

But I am also glad I made the hard decision to leave there and pursue my dream of teaching college. Most college students really want to learn, although I still have to use those skills of coaxing reluctant learners to get back in the game, skills I honed in those two years in Mooresville. And I value the intellectual life of a university, the stimulation I get from colleagues who are experts in their respective fields, active scholars as well as committed teachers.

I came to Winthrop in 1993, not for myself, but for my wife. I was happy in my first full-time college teaching job at Converse, but my wife was commuting daily between Spartanburg and Charlotte. After seven years of that brutal drive, she was wearing down, and I knew I had to find a job near where she worked. UNCC and Davidson turned me down quickly, so Winthrop was my last hope. I came here for my wife, but it was not long before I knew that I had come for myself too.

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that was just talk, but I soon learned how true it is. I have come to love Winthrop dearly: my colleagues, the staff, the administration, the campus, but most of all the students.

I have been honored for the past few years to direct Winthrop’s Teaching and Learning Center. It has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career, and it has humbled me to see the talents of our faculty and staff. I have enjoyed arranging TLC presentations, conducting a few of my own, doing teaching consultations, and starting the Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning (with great help from Dana Bruneau).

Most of all, I have enjoyed writing *The Weekly Reader*. I should say “mostly enjoyed,” because there have been many weeks when I stared at a blank screen and tore out my little remaining hair trying to think of something to write. I have been gratified by the feedback to my weekly musings about teaching and learning. I will miss talking to you in this way—but hey, I have a few more weeks! I am going to make the most of them, right up until the end. Thank you, my friends!

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.

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

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

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

Thought For the Week

"What a robust people, what a nation of thinkers we might be, if we would only lay ourselves on the shelf occasionally and renew our edges!"
--Mark Twain