

ISSUES IN TEACHING
AND LEARNING

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ISSUES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING, VOLUME 8

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ITL, published under the auspices of Rhode Island College, is an e-journal that seeks to foster and deepen pedagogical dialogue and by extension improve the teaching and learning process among Rhode Island College faculty and others.

Volume 8 of *Issues in Teaching and Learning (ITL)*, which you will find on the following pages, is our second of the 2011/2012 academic year. I have been grateful to serve as a co-editor for these two volumes. Last fall, *ITL* gave faculty from across campus the opportunity to share news on topics pertinent to teaching and learning at Rhode Island College (i.e., writing instruction, online learning, assessment, and general education).

For this issue we took a different approach. We decided that we would invite faculty to participate in a writing assignment. Our call for contributors went out back in December:

ITL's editorial board would like to invite contributors for the next issue (spring 2012), a themed edition that will focus on perspectives of various RIC *Generations*. We are inviting junior, mid-career, and senior faculty to reflect on their professional lives as teachers and to share thoughts on current issues in teaching and learning in higher education.

In this issue, we are pleased to share the perspectives and musings of nine RIC faculty from across generations and disciplines. Before we hear from them, though, we'd like to briefly share a bit of what we've learned from the process of “assigning writing” to our colleagues.



REACH
INSPIRE
CONNECT

1. Faculty like to have clear and well-developed assignment guidelines (and appreciate models).

After putting out our call for contributors, we found that for some, our directions lacked specificity and adequate elaboration. Faculty contacted us asking for clarification: “What *exactly* is it that you want us to write about?” they wanted to know. We followed up with more detailed instructions and when we had an early submission, sent it along as a model for others to follow or work against.

2. Faculty sometimes experience stress, anxiety, and insecurity when completing writing assignments.

Writing can be an anxious craft, no matter how long you've been at it. Here are a few notable quotes from email exchanges we had with our writers:

I have no idea if this is what you're looking for, or whether anybody will be interested in it, but here goes.

I hope this is worth the electrons!

I have to say, I've written a draft of this thing and I JUST DO NOT LIKE IT.

If you want to use [my submission] great, if not that is perfectly fine as well. Writing is not my one of my strengths, but I gave it a whirl.

3. Faculty appreciate feedback on their writing while it is in-process.

This one isn't all that surprising. Most of the writers we know need feedback at some point in the process--to tell them that they're on the right (or wrong) track or just to offer words of support. Here's a small sampling of what we heard from our contributors as we worked with them on their drafts:

Thank you VERY MUCH for all your persistent encouragement in the last few e-mails. It actually really worked (!!) and put me at ease when I started working on my initial draft this weekend.

I guess I wanted some reassurance that [this draft] is what you want. Let me know what you think.

I never took any writing courses, nor is it my field of expertise, so constructive criticism is the only way I will learn and improve.

4. Faculty sometimes miss deadlines or turn their work in late.

As the deadline for submission loomed...we started to hear from our colleagues. Many needed more time.

I know I keep promising you my article. It's nearly there -- I'm just stuck on how to end it because it's just too abrupt right now. Y'know?

You'll certainly have my contribution by Friday at the latest (though I'm hoping that you'll actually have it by tomorrow.)

Not done yet: but close, but close. Will send to you before the

day is out or perish in the attempt. (For reals).

It looks like I won't get to this until Fri, sorry. But it is in progress, just a very busy week.

5. New or different genres or types of writing present new challenges for faculty.

Over time, most of us get comfortable with certain types of writing--usually the kinds we do over and over again. In colleges and universities, our writing is typically of two sorts: workplace or academic/professional. When asked to write in a different mode (personal or reflective) some faculty felt it was a real challenge:

I can't understand why [this reflection] turned out so difficult to write. Something about being personal (which I always have a terrible time with) and also not wanting to repeat completely obvious bromides that sound like a random job candidate's teaching statement, made it take a while.

We don't typically write personal reflections for a professional audience, so a piece of me wonders who will care about what I have to say.

When faced with writing in a new or different genre or mode, some faculty understood that writing, itself, could be used as a tool to figure out what one wants to say:

Let me put some words to screen and I'll have a better sense of how to reply.

These five lessons are both remarkable and common sense. We see a direct connection between what we've learned from our faculty colleagues and the work we all engage in with students in the classroom here at RIC.

Like us, students need:

1. clear and well-developed assignment guidelines (and, if possible, models);
2. understanding and empathy for the anxiety that writing can sometimes cause;
3. feedback on their writing *while they are still in the process* of writing it;
4. a firm deadline (with some flexibility, if possible);
5. instruction and guidance when facing the challenge of writing in new genres.

It's not a leap to see that our students, like us, are always in the process of becoming writers--always facing new writing situations that create new feelings and present new opportunities for learning. When it comes to writing, if we can think of our students less as *students* and more as *writers-in-process* (like ourselves), we will likely find better ways to teach them.

We would like to close by thanking the faculty who took up this writing assignment and whose words now appear in the pages that follow. We'd also like to thank Veronica Bruscini, our layout specialist, who has helped usher *ITL* into its newest and latest incarnation.

Happy reading and have a great summer.

Mike Michaud, Co-Editor

(with Joe Zornado, Co-Editor)

ISSUES IN
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THIRTY-PLUS

by Daniel Weisman
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In print journalism tradition, the number “thirty” appears at the end of a news article, to inform editors and typesetters where the story concludes. The origin of “thirty” is lost to history. As a journalism minor in college, I was taught “-30-” was based on the length, in inches, of a two-column story in a fifteen-inch tabloid newspaper. More plausible explanations point to the Western Union code for “no more - the end” (30) in the days of telegraphed news stories (Signal Corps Association, n.d.), or the time of day press offices closed in a less hectic bygone era (3 O’Clock pm) (Kogan, 2007). To this day, print journalists refer to their final columns as “Thirty.” Why start with this reference? I recently completed thirty years at the college, qualifying me for inclusion in this compendium. Sorry, rumors this is my own “thirty” are overly optimistic.

So, what changes have I seen in thirty years? As I sat down to write this, it turned out “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Here goes.

Back in the fall of 1981, during my initial semester here, I cited the Cuban Missile Crisis as an example of “brinkmanship,” a topic in the “social policy” section of the syllabus for “Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare.” As I finished describing the 1962 standoff involving the US, USSR and Cuba, a tentative hand went up and a hesitant student asked, “So, what happened?” One student (about 30 years old) was smiling knowingly. The others had no idea. I was 34 in 1981. Now I’m 65. My classes, of course, remain mostly populated with 20-somethings, so the age gap has grown to a chasm. This semester, I referred to President Nixon in a class, and got an “I heard of him” from a proud class member, followed by “me too” from one or two others amidst mostly blank faces. In view of the two-to-one greater degree of difficulty (38 vs. 19 years), my current

group shows substantially greater historical awareness than their earlier counterparts.

When I assigned my 1981 students to bring in articles from the Sunday newspaper, addressing any of the topics we had discussed in class that semester, a few approached me after class to ask where to obtain a Sunday newspaper. Today, they instantly access any newspaper in the world on their cells. When asked to write about (summarize, synthesize, critique, reflect on) material they so easily find online these days, they struggle to comprehend and communicate.

I hesitate to bring up reading and writing, but it is a salient component of our experience here. It feels like I’ve been correcting basic writing since I arrived here, grammar and spelling I know I learned in elementary school. [I have a book coming out this year: *Professional Writing for Social Work Practice*. Springer. -Adv.] In spite of widespread faculty perceptions about ever-deteriorating student writing, it appears very little has changed from 1981 to 2012 (Fendrich, 2009).

To be sure, there are differences. Today’s students can track down a factoid in nanoseconds, a nonexistent interval thirty years ago. But they are stymied when asked to assess the meaning of information they so quickly access, or to discuss two factoids simultaneously. Instant information does not translate to intellectual curiosity or adroitness.

Today’s students appear to be struggling more than their predecessors: working more hours, earning less per hour in real dollars, paying higher costs of post-secondary education and other expenses. These days I have at least one student per semester who borrows my desk copy of the text because s/he cannot afford the \$80 or more for a used copy.

Yesteryear’s students drove nicer cars than mine, and had cell phones well before I did. More of today’s appear to use RIPTA or make do with hand-me-down junkers. Cells have become a distraction, as students text and play games in class.

On the plus side, they can help us program our cells. I enjoy impressing them with my texting skills, Facebook page and familiarity with Angry Birds (courtesy of my children). One 30-something student this semester bragged in class that her father remembers rotary phones with long coiled cords, and gas under \$2. I love this job.

But today's students are equally, if not more, beguiling – genuine, heavily invested, disarmingly unworldly (except for workplace experiences foreign to my college-age generation), respectful, obedient. I continue to experience our students as much less curious than we were. I am challenged constantly to pique their interests, intrigue them. Maybe that's because they're too tired, distracted or myopic as an artifact of the multimedia age. It couldn't be my memory error.

In my view, the recent five to ten years have witnessed a broadening of the College's collective instructional acumen while we have progressed from a family atmosphere to a more professionalized post-secondary institution. Has our product changed? Surely, but I cannot quantify it. At RIC committee meetings, I'm usually the most senior (in age and service), enriched by the knowledge, perspectives and experiences of my newer colleagues, some of whom are my own children's ages. Ouch.

There have been bumps and warts. I thought of moving on a couple of times. But this place fits me so well: its mission, its students, its challenges and strengths, the whole "enchillavy" (as a friend of mine likes to say). Coincidental with our growth, RIC remains a personalized and supportive place to work. I believe the institution appreciates and celebrates our individual accomplishments. We are encouraged to grow professionally without feeling belittled. After 30-plus years here, I still feel like a valued team member, and the feeling is mutual.

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OBSERVATIONS OF A “BORN AGAIN” COMPUTER SCIENCE TEACHER

by Namita Sarawagi

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Rebirth

I have had the rare opportunity of being “born-again” as a faculty member in the Math and CS Dept at RIC. In 1992, long before the Web, Google, Facebook, and smartphones, I joined RIC as a freshly minted Ph.D, the first in the department with a Computer Science doctorate. I taught for almost five years and completed the tenure process, but chose to resign in 1997 due to family reasons. Eleven years later, I was fortunate to be hired again in a tenure-track position. During that decade, the world changed around all of us in a myriad different ways, and I came back to a student body and teaching environment that in some ways made me feel like a time-traveling visitor from the pre-Information Age.

When I learned about the topic for this issue [of *ITL*], I was eager to take the opportunity to share my observations and personal perspective on how teaching and learning at RIC has changed across this tumultuous decade.

Past and Present

When I left RIC in January 1997, the World Wide Web was in its infancy, Google did not exist, and cell-phones were non-existent. Now, “googling” is a verb, “multi-tasking” is the norm, and “texting” has become an addiction. So much has changed in these last 15 years for the faculty, who have adapted, welcomed, and, in some cases, struggled with the relentless pace of change, reinvention and transformation. However, this highlights a major difference between faculty and students; what seems different and transformational to us is as natural as breathing to the students. They have grown up in this Information age, and take for granted always-on connectivity, resources and answers a few clicks away on the Internet, and multitasking every minute of the day. The disparity in perspective and expectations can significantly impact our teaching and their learning.

Learning

Learning styles have changed dramatically over the years, in positive as well as negative ways.

Attendance

In the past, students attended class regularly, probably because a missed class was difficult to make up. It meant students had to make an effort to reach out to the teacher or classmates to get the material, by coming for help during office hours or getting help at the Math Learning Center, or through their study groups. Today, classwork is posted on Learning Management Systems such as Blackboard and students can catch up easily on missed classes. They can find lots of online resources to help them understand the content. They have less need for study groups, collaborative learning, and office hours. These benefits do come with a price, however.

Even when they are physically present in the classroom, many students are mentally absent. They tend to be less focused, and more inattentive and distracted. Students now do not come alone to the classroom; they bring along their “friends,” and the outside world at large, on their mobile, hand-held devices. They are continually distracted by the buzz and discreet vibrations of their cell phones and by the text messages they receive during class, even in classes where the teacher naively proscribes the use of such devices. When laptops are allowed in classes, multitasking is the name of the game; note taking and classwork are interspersed with Facebook posts, game playing, and, for the especially advanced multitasker, watching the latest blockbuster movie.

Collaboration

In my previous teaching incarnation in the 1990s, one of my own learning experiences was the introduction of collaborative learning, using group work in the classroom. I found that students loved it, welcoming the change from a more passive

lecture format and the opportunity to actively interact and share with their classmates. Now I am more experienced and effective at using group work in class, but I find that today's students hesitate to interact! I have to push them to collaborate and share their knowledge and thoughts with each other, and I point out that even for those who understand the material well, "teaching" someone else is the best way of solidifying one's own understanding. Eventually, most students do collaborate productively, but I find I still have a few students who refuse to do that, preferring to work on their own. Ironically, students seem to be more comfortable chatting via Facebook rather than face-to-face. The extent to which some students prefer electronic interaction to direct human contact was brought home to me vividly one day when I realized that a student had sent me an email to setup an appointment to come and see me while that student was sitting in my class!

Student Backgrounds and Preparation

I do not have hard data about this, but from my observations now and from my memories from the 1990s, I sense that more students are now attending RIC directly after high school. They seem less mature and more unclear of what they want to do, and why they are in college. I find this somewhat surprising in an age when information is so readily and widely available.

Specifically in Computer Science, there are always a few incoming freshman who have chosen it as their major and are excited about it, but do not realize the kinds of jobs a graduate with a CS degree can get. Among the misconceptions that I have had to dispel as an advisor is that a bachelor's degree in CS is the requisite step towards a career fixing, building, or interconnecting computers in a network. Their first computer programming course can be a revelation that Computer Science is more than just using computers; it requires an interest in problem solving, and an aptitude for logic and analysis. Even many of the students who are aware of, and enthusiastic about, the career path upon which a CS degree can launch them do not realize the amount of academic rigor

and discipline it requires, and find themselves unprepared for it.

More generally, it appears that many incoming students today are unaware of basic skills needed by college students. They may need specific instructions and hand-holding on how to study, repeated encouragement to actually read the textbook, and handouts when doing homework. Invariably, the day before an assignment is due, I get plaintive emails that say: "I have no idea how to start this assignment/computer program." And invariably, my answers are along the lines of "Read section 4 of Chapter 1, where a similar example is discussed (or which we have already discussed in class)."

Teaching

Being an instructor of both Mathematics and Computer Science, technology has always played an important role in my teaching. In the 90's the "new" technology being used in Math Education was a Graphing Calculator and software like MatLab and Maple. Now there are a wide variety of teaching tools: e-books, interactive software, online homework, online videos (khanacademy.org), and more. In Computer Science teaching, the trend is to use visual tools to explain concepts and see "under the hood" and to use graphical environments and software in order to attract and retain the students of this generation. Many such teaching tools have been developed by various teachers and are readily available, and most of them are free. In my "born-again" avatar as a teacher, I am very enthusiastic in using these new visual tools; they give me new ways of presenting and perceiving the same concepts that I had learned myself in a far less exciting way, appealing to the student in me. As a result, I can relate with the perspective of today's students more than I would if I were teaching in the same ways that I was taught. This definitely enhances my teaching experience and has a direct impact on the learning in my classroom.

Now in this electronic age, I use a LMS (Blackboard), for all my courses, where I post my lecture notes, handouts, and homework assignments. I rarely collect any work on paper,

instead asking that most work be submitted electronically on the LMS. This makes it very easy for a student who may miss class to find out and catch up on what they have missed, and get an overview of the course. It also makes it easy for me to review my whole course, especially when I teach it again, as it makes it much simpler and quicker to edit and improve it.

The biggest impact in teaching and learning Mathematics has been the recent development of textbooks with online homework websites. Students can do their homework problems online and, if they have a question or need help, they have several options, such as to read the related section in the e-textbook or to watch a video which shows a step-by-step solution to a similar problem. Students can submit their homework and it is graded instantly with feedback. Students can immediately learn from their mistakes. This rapid turnaround time eliminates a problem with the traditional process where homework was returned to students a week or more after they handed it in, and the feedback was less valuable due to the intervening delay.

Now, with online homework, teachers can instantly monitor the homework submissions, and come to the next class knowing which problems or topics students have had difficulty with and need additional review before proceeding to the next topic. Online technology has made the homework experience much more valuable to the student and made the order of covering topics in the classroom much more timely and streamlined.

Computer Science has grown and changed very rapidly in all these years, due to the advances made in computers and the Internet revolution. New programming languages and also a new programming paradigm (Object-Oriented) are taught in the introductory programming courses. This has caused CS to become a more difficult major than it used to be, but unfortunately the same progress has not been made in secondary schools in this field. Even though students entering college now are more computer

literate than in the past, introductory Computer Science is still not taught in most high-schools in RI. Also, even more unfortunate is the decrease in proficiency in math and science of matriculating students, which is a well-known fact. My perspective as a Computer Science instructor of this generation can be summarized in this sentence: *We are teaching harder concepts to lesser-prepared students.* In order to succeed in our mission, it is clear that further changes are required in our teaching and in student preparation.

Future

Even with all these technological advances, in the world today, we have a shortage of STEM students. The term STEM [1] did not exist until 2001, and despite our children growing up using technology, fewer students are enrolling in the STEM disciplines. Preparation in schools may be a factor, as demonstrated by the 2009 scores for the Program for International Student Assessment [2], with the U.S. ranking 14th in Reading, 17th in Science and 25th in Math, out of 34 countries. We obviously have work to do to inspire students to select STEM disciplines and to help them succeed in them.

A closing thought: the world in which our students are growing up has been transformed, but have we as teachers kept up with and changed our approaches fast enough so as to connect with this generation of students? Sooner that we can anticipate, we will have students sitting in our classrooms wearing Google glasses [3]! How are we going to relate to them? One idea that seems intriguing is to take the Internet bull by the horns, step through the looking glass (and over the debris of various mixed metaphors), and “flip the classroom” [4, 5] upside down and

“The world in which our students are growing up has been transformed, but have we as teachers kept up with and changed our approaches fast enough so as to connect with this generation of students?”

and inside out – with lecturing done outside the classroom, and tutoring, or homework, done inside the classroom. I'm sure that will be just one of the many ideas that we all consider and experiment with, as the classroom continues to evolve ever more rapidly.

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[3] <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/04/google-begins-testing-its-augmented-reality-glasses/>

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[5] <http://www.economist.com/node/21529062>



CHANGE IN “EDUCATION” IN MY LIFETIME AS AN EDUCATOR, WITH EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

by Nazanin Natalie Sahba

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In 1979, Pink Floyd's musical inspiration sent millions of British schoolchildren running into the school grounds, chanting with one voice: "We don't need no educa-shun." This was a clear message of demanding change in the education system, a change towards new, liberal, more open and modern methods of instruction. Students expected more social freedom. Today, students are also demanding or expecting change in the education system – a change towards new technologies, a change that would make them marketable in today's technology-oriented environment.

It was just “yesterday” – the fall of 1978 – that I went into a classroom in Craig-Lee and started my career as an educator at RIC. I was teaching courses that were exactly related to my educational background, Materials Science, Materials Processing, Materials Testing, Product Design, Statistical Process Control and Quality Control, all with a focus on manufacturing. I also had set up a materials testing laboratory in Whipple Hall to be used by students and for industry training.

- Those days, I (the faculty) was the one with knowledge and tons of information related to the subject matters. I, the faculty, was the one who knew it all!

- Those days, students were more compliant and a lot more appreciative.

SO

- Those days, I provided the knowledge, conceptual understanding of the subject matter and abundant information to my students, educated them and experienced a “WOW” reaction.

Then, “someday,” I'm not sure exactly when, manufacturing died in RI. The major that I was teaching was not needed any

more, and the sun set on the program of Industrial Technology. I adapted to this change, used my education and transferable skills from industry and, with my colleagues from industrial technology and management, developed a new program of study in Operations Management. Currently, I'm teaching courses that relate to my educational background and my learning experience, including Operations Management, Quality Assurance, Environmental and Safety Management, and Business Statistics. I am also directing the Internship Program in the School of Management for all majors by creating connections with local businesses and industries.

- These days, thanks to the Internet and search engines, a wealth of information is available to our students; more than one person can retain and remember. Now I, the faculty, am not the one who knows it all.

- These days, students see themselves more as equals and friends, but they are still appreciative.

- These days, I provide the knowledge and conceptual understanding of the subject matter and provoke the students to look at all possible available information, analyze it, discuss it, make sense of it and, together as a team, we arrive at a conclusion.

The current generation has developed under the digital wave. Our students are completely in tune with the new media and their lives are integrated with new technologies. Many use it to create new things. Many use it to do things in new ways. Many use it to entertain. Many use it to do their school work or gather information and knowledge. They educate themselves using new media; they connect to the world and they all use it to communicate all the time!

Today's students have seen more and know more, and this transformation has serious implications for us in the field of education.

Yes, classes can be taught without new technologies, but there will be disconnect between the way students are taught in college and the way the outside world approaches them. Educators can and should mitigate this disconnect and take advantage of these emerging technologies for instructional purposes. Educational institutions need to adapt to the changing world; many educators have already started and are implementing excellent teaching practices by collaboration and dynamic integration of traditional and new technology/media teaching. Therefore, the teacher who hasn't learned to use new technologies, at least at the personal level, will be obsolete in a few years and is not doing their students justice.

Clearly, information technology is shaping the present and the future. Yet, technology is just an enabler. It is instructional technologies that are the important tools for improving different aspects of learning and applying what is learned.



MY TRANSITION FROM INDUSTRY TO ACADEMIA—REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING AT RIC

by Lisa Z. Bain

Associate Professor, Accounting and Computer Information Systems

This is my seventh year of teaching full time at Rhode Island College after spending about ten years in the Information Systems field. My teaching philosophy and focus has always been on providing excellent customer service to my students, as was drilled into me from my days as a Systems Engineer at IBM. My industry experience prepared me well for many aspects of the teaching profession, but not all of my skills translated smoothly to the new environment. Trying new techniques to service my customers came naturally, including Blackboard, clickers, group projects, computer labs, hybrid delivery, and online exams. However, true pedagogical theories were not part of my vernacular, nor were the verbose and lengthy vetting of concepts. The corporate world moves at a much faster pace and values efficiency and flexibility over contemplation and scholarship. Academia has the luxury of time and further research.

My transition from a business professional to an academic happened in fits over time until theories and models came as naturally to me as projects and deadlines once did. The journey has been at times challenging and frustrating, but in the end the most rewarding because of the impact I can make on the lives of my students. This reflection focuses on the three most important adaptations that I have made to allow this to happen.

First, students are my customers and I am here to provide a business value that they have paid for. In the beginning, this meant accommodating each and every request from each and every student, regardless of its impact on myself or the other students. This philosophy was extremely popular among the students for obvious reasons and created an atmosphere of appreciation during class sessions.

However, it did not take long for me to realize that this approach was causing an increased workload and inconsistency among my courses and my students. The general philosophy of excellent customer service did not completely make the transition from the business world. Allowing students to bend the rules here and there, like taking a late exam or submitting assignments past the due date, did not really serve them in the long run. It did not teach them skills like time management and responsibility. In addition, it only takes one student to work the system in their favor to create an unfair situation to the other students.

Therefore, my first adaptation was to still provide excellent customer service, but within the guidelines and policies of well-crafted syllabi that were both accommodating and consistent. I was able to find a balance between the two by developing a solid framework from which to address student issues and questions. This created a fair and level playing field for all students and a reasonable workload for myself. It also benefits the students by giving them the much-needed opportunity to develop skills that they will desperately need in the business world. Ideally, this has created the famous win-win situation where my demands are reasonable, fair, and equal. It has also allowed me to say “no” without the ramifications of not servicing my customers. I can now say this, knowing it is in the best interest of both the students and myself.

The second challenge the teaching profession presented was again in the form of customer service, but more specifically in the ability to truly know your customer. In the business world, you get to know your customer’s business and then coach and guide them through their tasks and needs. The academic model suggests that students are responsible for guiding themselves through the material once it is presented to them. The students should know how to study for exams, prepare for class, and complete assignments. The instructor’s

role is more of a facilitator.

My experience has been just the opposite in that students need coaching in how to do most of the basic fundamentals. Should it be this way? The answer is no, it should not. Students should have developed these skills in middle and high school. Regardless, they are here and we are here and the problem must be addressed.

I have found that the majority of RIC students are quite genuine in nature and want to learn and develop these skills. They simply do not have the background, have never been given the opportunity, or do not have the appropriate support structure in place. I see many of them as rough stones that just need polishing. Does this create extra work for faculty? In most cases, yes it does. Is it worth it? Absolutely. I will never forget a student of mine that was interning for the first time at a local company. He had never been exposed to an office environment where employees had their own cubicle with a telephone and a computer. This type of professional environment was a completely new experience for him. Another example is a student that was surprised that I deducted points from an essay question for using bullets instead of complete sentences. In most cases, students like these only require a bit of coaching, a few more lines of instruction on an exam, or an extra minute or two of discussion about an upcoming homework assignment. These small items can have a positive and lasting impact on students. It is about knowing your customer.

The last adaption that has helped me make the transition from industry to academia is what I call professionalism. The business environment demands employees to arrive on time, meet deadlines, speak properly, and behave appropriately. These concepts can be mimicked in the classroom and reinforced with attendance and course policies. We, as teachers, have the opportunity and platform to be role models for students and teach them more than just course content. My syllabus and course work require the use of professional and appropriate language in all classes and submissions. I believe this demonstrates respect for students as adults and future

professionals. Students may complain at the time, but these same students later ask me to review and correct their resumes or to be a reference. Some may call my approach tough love, but I just see this as my role as an instructor in the School of Management. I am deeply indebted to the instructors and role models that helped prepare and shape me for my first job after college. It is the least that I can do to repay that debt and give back to students that need and appreciate the same kind of guidance.

My current career plans are to continue in academia for the foreseeable future. I feel I can make a significant impact here at RIC with the type of students currently enrolled as business majors. The opportunity to make a difference in someone's life is just too rewarding to give up at this point in my life. Honestly, I do not know if I will ever make the full and complete transition from industry to academia. A blend of both environments might be the right balance for me personally. I do hope that I can always use my business skills to mold all my students into true professionals that can go forward into successful business careers.



TO BE PRACTICAL—OR NOT TO BE

by Alison Shonkwiler
Assistant Professor, English

One new thing for me in coming to RIC is an awareness of teaching teachers. There were probably plenty of teachers-to-be in classes I taught before. But with so many RIC undergraduates already enrolled in an education program and on the path to a professional degree or credential, the practical connection to a larger culture of education is more obvious. In the classroom I see discussions being implicitly shaped by students' wondering, "How am I going to turn around and teach this?" I'm more than happy to exploit students' sense of preprofessionalism for my secret liberal-arts agenda: For instance, students can gain terrific insights about who gets to construct the meaning of a text if we discuss why certain texts have tended to be assigned over others, or whether avoiding a controversial text constitutes indirect censorship, or how to teach an offensive text. Students see that there's no such thing as *just reading* a book.

The irony is that I went to graduate school, well . . . just to read books. For me, teaching was not a professional calling; it was mainly a convenient alibi to explain my time in grad school. In fact I arrived the first year with the common assumptions—perpetuated everywhere by graduate programs that offer no formal teaching training or background in pedagogy—that (1) good teachers are born, not made and (2) a certain amount of knowledge of the field is all it takes. These are totally contradictory assumptions, but they were both powerful in keeping my expectations of myself as a teacher low. In retrospect this was probably an excellent way to begin. I didn't try to change myself; I didn't try to imitate the famous teacher at my college who held a mic and ran up and down the aisles of a packed auditorium like a talk-show host. To imitate the teacher who sat in place and taught students to close read was ambitious enough. Even developing enough skill in this to be convincing didn't actually overcome my suspicion that this wasn't *real* teaching; it was just a process of

transmitting information. Still, again, this isn't a bad way to start, especially in a discipline where there is just so much to read, so much one hasn't read, and so much one's students don't even know they haven't read.

Now in teaching teachers, I'm more aware that I'm modeling the act. I'm more conscious of the performative energy of teaching, the need to show students *how* and not just *what*. Offering oneself as a walking, talking example of how to think about literature, rather than a source of information about it, is a more personal style than I ever imagined willingly consenting to when I nervously started teaching ten years ago. But it feels more urgently required. I don't think this is just me. Or just RIC. The field is changing rapidly. Literacy is changing rapidly. Students show up with assigned texts on a Kindle or an iPad and argue that downloading an e-book is cheaper and more practical. It may seem contradictory to resist this argument when at the same time I'm trying to model practicality in my teaching methods. But the relationship between the practical and nonpractical in education is, I think, exactly the conversation that needs to be had. There is value in the nonpractical. Preparing students to be able to advocate for the humanities requires modeling an openness and willingness to ask questions such as, What is literature? Why read it? Many of my own teachers had the luxury of assuming students would figure out the whys as we went along. This may be a riskier assumption now. I think English departments will increasingly have to incorporate the case *for* literature into the teaching *of* literature.

Here is where it seems especially important to go beyond a transmitting-information model of teaching and instead to practice a kind of nondefensive openness in the classroom, to acknowledge the discipline's own conflicted relationships to practicality. The pre-professional students I've encountered at RIC, who already have a career application in mind, are the ones least conflicted about the value of studying English.

Students I've taught elsewhere and those who are not future teachers don't share this assurance and are far more likely to wonder how they will get jobs. So, ironically, it is the group with the most practical orientation that needs to be equipped to advocate literature's nonpracticality to future readers.

I think my changing attitude toward performance in the classroom has to do with sensing this need for a different kind of educational advocacy, and a willingness to model our own critical fits and starts. It is hard to be mantling and dismantling oneself as a teacher at the same time, but it is the approach that most often leads to feeling that I'm doing "real" teaching. It's a practice of allowing the seams to show. I'm not sure yet how far one can go with this in the classroom—or how far I'll be comfortable taking it. But my expectations for my own teaching have come to include it.

A couple of times I have showed students a clip of a speech by the late Apple founder Steve Jobs in which he argues for the value of the nonpractical. Though working-class students are sometimes understandably skeptical of his untraditional academic path, they see what's compelling about him personally as a counternarrative of professionalization. He offers an example for students to think about—one model among, hopefully, a range of models.

None of this is to downplay the importance of transmitting information. (Ostensibly we watch Steve Jobs' speech to help illuminate a particularly difficult one of Ralph Waldo Emerson's.) But my definition of "performing" in the classroom has come to include these different forms of modeling—not always by me personally, but through examples of personal engagement.



SHE SMILED

by Maria Lawrence

Associate Professor, Elementary Education

Thirty-four years ago on the Rhode Island College campus, I found myself immersed in undergraduate courses. I arrived in Rhode Island from California around 1976, established residency, and applied to RI College.

The campus – amazingly – has not changed as much as one might think. I commuted daily via RIPTA buses from Coventry (it took at least one, sometimes two transfers) and worked no less than two jobs at any one time – sometimes as many as three jobs. Locally, I walked or ran everywhere as I was unable to afford a car. I walked to Warwick where I worked two jobs until I saved enough money to buy a bicycle. People became accustomed to seeing my head bent down over a book or punching numbers into a calculator.

I wasn't able to participate in on-campus life, although I wish that I could have. **The closest I came to a campus life beyond attending classes was work study.** The students with whom I forged “classmate” relationships were not the people I socialized with after class. They, too, were either working full time or had family responsibilities that demanded their attention.

Clarke Science became my home on campus. I loved going to lectures, and the laboratories were a carnival of wonderment and an opportunity to socialize with my classmates while learning. The **connection** between theory and investigation manifested itself in a report of the findings. Ah! Always considered an acceptable writer, I spent many hours reviewing my data, thinking about my technique, checking my calculations and, finally, trying to encapsulate everything into a distillation of essential meaning. The genre of writing may go by many names, but I call it the “abstract.”

Informational writing doesn't really convey what it means to write a good abstract. The abstract is where you demonstrate an understanding of the content, methodology, and chemical

or physical processes, the limitations of equipment and those of the investigator. Students would ask, “How long does it have to be?” The answer: Fifty words or less – no more. What do I need to say? What is the most direct way to state it? What words convey my exact meaning with the accuracy the discipline demands?

In the end, I learned a good abstract is one that succinctly answers these three questions. And so, thirty-four years later, I find myself reading many abstracts in a variety of fields of study – tribal law and education among them. My favorite self-appointed task however is reviewing the research abstracts of rising science majors and graduate students who submit their research for publication at science conferences. It allows me to stay current in my first field of study, chemistry, but it also allows me to share feedback about an important communicative style whose communicative skills transcend the artificial boundaries of academic disciplines - telling a story well.

Here is my autobiographical six word Clarke Science story: She smiled, having passed physical chemistry.



THE VALUE OF MENTORING

by Christine Marco

Associate Professor, Psychology

Director of Graduate Studies in Psychology

When I was awarded tenure, my friends and family, almost without fail, said “Congratulations! Now you can take it easy.” Despite my attempts to contradict this notion, they remained steadfast in their beliefs that the rest of my career would be nothing but cushy. Time has since confirmed that I was correct. My career since receiving tenure has been anything but cushy, but it has been a rewarding journey that continues to evolve.

Earlier in my career, I focused more on the practical mechanics of teaching. How would I create good syllabi or test items? How – in the days before Power Point – would I best utilize the blackboard, overhead, and handouts? How would I write my lecture notes without creating a boring script read in a monotone homage to Ben Stein? Fortunately, I was introduced early to Wilbert (“Bill”) McKeachie’s classic, *Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning College Teacher*, which wisely walked me through the trials and tribulations of a young professor. The book was required reading for a class on the Teaching of Psychology that I took as a graduate student. I was also required, as part of the course, to teach two lectures in an Introduction to Psychology class. Those lectures, terrifying as they were, were made exquisitely more painful by the fact that we were required to videotape, watch, and evaluate our fledgling efforts as college instructors. In retrospect, those experiences had an enduring effect on me. Although I had moved to the other side of the desk, I recognized that I was an apprentice learning my craft. I need not reinvent the wheel nor flounder on my own, however. Many had walked these steps before me and had plenty to teach, if I was open to their mentoring.

Although I feel like the basic mechanics of my courses have been ironed out, I revise various aspects of my courses virtu-

ally every semester. My friends and family often ask me why. Now that my lectures are written, what more is there to do? I have made revisions based on student feedback and performance. I have upgraded the technology, such as when I started using Power Point. Sometimes, after doing the same course for a several years, I made revisions to help maintain my own interest. Also, I have to remain current on content and add new material as it is added to the scholarly base of information. I therefore am constantly tweaking my courses. In my earlier days, I had no hesitation to jump in to try new things. Some worked, some not so well. I learned much from my trial-and-error approach, but I now know that I can rely on the scholarship on teaching and learning to provide evidence-based approaches to teaching. My discipline publishes a journal of empirical research on the Teaching of Psychology, which has been invaluable to me. Through my involvement as a grader for the Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology Exam, I have been fortunate to meet a national network of colleagues who freely share their own knowledge and advice on teaching. I therefore feel like I have many invaluable resources available to help me as I continue to revise old courses and develop new ones.

At this point in time, there are two main issues on my mind.

One is how to teach writing at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. When teaching, I have realized that I need to discuss not just the mechanics of writing, but the process. I find that many students are not aware that “good writing” takes time and multiple revisions. They seem genuinely surprised when I tell them that I rarely sit down and write something in a single session. My writing is an iterative process with false starts, multiple revisions, and multiple breaks between writing sessions. I try to use the analogy of building a

“Although I had moved to the other side of the desk, I recognized that I was an apprentice learning my craft... Many had walked these steps before me and had plenty to teach, if I was open to their mentoring.”

house, which does not occur from first to last nail without a hitch. The builder will often have to stop the process, evaluate problems, and make changes in the plan for the final vision to come to fruition. I have found that it is just as important to teach students about the writing process as well as the product.

Another topic at the forefront of my mind is distance learning. Our society has evolved to where businesses and our personal lives are conducted electronically. On the one hand, I think it is beneficial because the online environment provides students with 24/7 access to their learning and allows them to review information until they have mastered it. On the other hand, I know how my career passion was ignited. During my undergraduate years, I worked as a research assistant for one professor and completed a senior thesis with another. I would work for hours in the office with my professors and had the types of meaningful conversations that only occur when people are simply sitting together in the same space. I am not sure whether those same conversations would have occurred had we been communicating online about the research projects. So, while I do think that there is a niche for online learning, I also wonder how to best *mentor* students in that environment. I still prefer face-to-face contact because I feel that it better emulates the mentoring I received in college, but I wonder how the presence of online teaching will play out over time for my own teaching.

As I look back, I have to acknowledge the importance of mentoring in my career. My college and graduate professors launched my career. Bill McKeachie wrote the book that started this journey on the right foot. My colleagues since then freely shared their experiences, offered tips, and allowed me to continually refine my craft. These experiences have made my work more than a job, but a career that I love. I hope to “pay it forward” by helping newer faculty as they settle into their careers and by sharing with them what others have shared so freely with me.



NOTES ON TREADING

by Emily Danforth
Assistant Professor, English

Last year at this time, I was filing my dissertation at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Love Library (its real name, and a pretty excellent one at that); picking up my hood and gown from the campus bookstore; and finishing a host of home improvement projects (from re-roofing a section of our porch to completely tearing down to the studs and then replastering a guest bedroom) in order to best prepare our house for a quick sale. I was also doing a daily “blessing count” for my great good fortune of having somehow landed such a plum position: that of a tenure-track assistant professor in the English Department at RIC. Come fall I would be teaching a slew of undergraduate creative writing courses (and by spring semester even one graduate workshop); I would eventually get to work directly with the students who put together the campus literary arts journal—*Shoreline*; and all of this would be happening in Providence, a city my partner and I had long been completely smitten with.¹ I’d been a full time graduate student and teaching assistant for the past seven years (MFA in Fiction and then right into a PhD in English-Creative Writing), and with the exception of a very brief two-year pit stop before that, my primary identity had been that of “student” since, I suppose, the age of five.

All of these major life changes—selling our house, the cross-country move, the transition from full time student to full time faculty member, the new department (and city and state and incomprehensibly complicated car insurance)—would have been a lot to manage on their own, but then there’s also one other major, major life event that’s happened for me this year: my novel—my debut novel—was published by HarperCollins just a couple of months ago, in February.² This was, of course, terribly exciting. (Really, just about as much excitement as anything in my life, well, ever.) It’s still exciting. But it also meant that in the fall, just as I was attempting to get my “sea legs” at RIC, I was working round-the-clock with my

editor on the final batch of copy-edits and minor changes, attending conferences and conventions to do early book promotion, and on the advice of (what seemed to be) the entire marketing staff of HarperCollins, saying yes to every interview request, blog post request, vlog post request, book club request, and public reading opportunity that might come my way. And, unbelievably, there were lots of these kinds of requests. This kind of attention was unquestionably a very good/lucky thing for the book. It was also, frankly, exhausting.

At first the notion of some blogger or fellow novelist or journalist wanting to interview me about the novel—my research, my writing—seemed not only fun and exciting, but even oddly “glamorous.” *You want to hear about my work? Really? You’re sure?* Ten interviews in, the same five or six questions on the table but me trying to answer them in unique ways, all while teaching and grading and meetings and advising took, necessarily, precedence, was no fun at all.

Last April, the me collecting her hood and gown and then heading home to put on a particle mask and knock down some horsehair plaster would have told you that all of this, everything to come in the following academic year, would be “living the dream.”³ This April, the me sitting here at my desk and writing this is still pretty sure that’s correct, she just has a much more realistic understanding of what “living the dream” entails, one that accounts for things like advising and meetings and grading taking up far more time than she ever allotted when dreaming said dream.⁴

Because it’s nearly the end of the semester and we’re all—students, faculty, staff—so busy, everyone’s schedules clogged like too many eggshells and rice noodles down a garbage disposal—full-up, stopped, no room left—and also because it’s near to the end of my very first year, but it’s not *yet* the end, just near to, still several weeks to power through, this

question of reflecting on and assessing my experiences here at RIC thus far, feels, frankly, impossible. (Or at the very least an exercise that will necessarily produce skewed results.) *Let me finish*, I keep thinking, *let me catch my breath: then I'll assess*. Maybe it feels that way because I also keep thinking—*This year is such an unusual year: not only is it my first on the job, but I just had my first novel come out, too. It's too much at once. It's just not a good one to go by. Next year will be a better pick for reflection, for appraisal, for "taking stock."*

Of course, the one thing that I'm actually sure of—even here during the April of my very first year—is that thinking like this will get me nowhere. Each semester to come will have its own complications and demands, and however productive I might be, however well I learn to juggle, to manage, there's always going to be something new to adapt to, to figure out. It's true that I'll never have another first year at RIC, and that I'll never again publish my first novel, but it's probably not particularly useful to focus on that combination, to give it more weight than it deserves. There's always a reason not to get work done or to feel overwhelmed, to say: *Not this time but next time. Next time I'll be ready*. And more often than not those "reasons" just end up being, for me anyway, excuses.

I've been trying to think of a single story that will work well as a metaphor for my time thus far here at Rhode Island College. I've had the pleasure of teaching some phenomenally gifted/interested/interesting writers this year and they've said some memorable things about their motivation(s) to write, to be at RIC, to be curious about the word and their place in it. But any single story, particularly one about a particular encounter with a student or in the classroom, would need to be manipulated, crafted, to drive home some larger truth I'd be trying to get at, and even still: one story wouldn't do the range of my experiences here justice. In a given week I move from inspired to frustrated to motivated to uncertain to overwhelmed to victorious to—you get the idea.⁵

So instead, I'll close by saying something about swimming. Of course, this is a little bit crafted, too, necessarily: but less so, I hope. (I hope you don't see me pulling the strings back here).

I've been a swimmer since the age of 2, on my first swim team at 5. Swimming is really the only sport I've ever felt myself to be "naturally" skilled at. I can swim for hours, for miles, without getting winded or even very tired. Throughout graduate school I would lap swim at least four times a week for an hour or so at a go. But since August, I've been to the RIC pool less than a dozen times total. Though the frequent closures over there certainly haven't helped—for a few weeks they had us changing behind a curtain on the pool deck, no joke—they're not wholly to blame: it's on me. I just felt out of "swim rhythm." I can't seem to find a pool with lap swim hours that work well with my teaching schedule, and the more swims I miss the more excuses I make about why I can't go. But the thing is: I need to be in a pool. I puzzle things out while I swim. I plan plot structures and moments in scenes and lines of dialogue. I often get ideas for stories or characters. The monotony provided by swimming a length, doing a flip-turn, swimming a length, is my deep thinking/meditation time. I've noticed the absence of that time, that routine, in unfortunate ways.

But, finally, now, here in April: I've managed to maintain my swim routine for a couple of weeks. This is nothing compared to years of never missing a swim, but it's a start. And it doesn't just feel good: it feels necessary. That I've not been able to get back to this routine until nearly the end of my first year is the unfortunate catch-22: because of the constant "newness" of the first year I couldn't find the time for the one routine that would have undoubtedly helped me better deal with the constant "newness" of my first year.

There are countless other swimming metaphors I might

build from, here, all of them probably too obvious to really say much, but I'll try my hand at one more, anyway. There's a whole lot of treading water your first year, or at least there was mine. Sometimes it's a kind of frantic treading, like a gangly eight year-old's doggy paddle, just keeping your head out the water (papers graded, conference presentation written, office hours kept, class prep prepped, etc, etc). But other times it's a more relaxed treading, more like the water aerobics class at the communal pool in a retirement home—the gentle sculling of the arms, the floppy rotary-kick of the legs, a bit more padding around the middle to help buoy you. When it's that kind of treading you have time to look around a bit, get a sense of the water you've found yourself in, maybe even chat with your pool buddies. I mean, you can't tread forever—who would want to, especially in a pool? It can be both dull and tiring to just manage to keep from going under but not really move anywhere, and in a pool it's all the worse. But if you're cast out of your fishing boat into the ocean, there's nothing dull at all about treading water, keeping your head up and out until help arrives, or until you feel strong enough to swim a little, tread some more, repeat, repeat. No question that my first year here at RIC was a bit more “cast out of rowboat into ocean” than I had originally thought would be part of “living the dream.” But now, here, in April, from my desk, I can most definitely see the shoreline in the distance.⁶

4. And much less time for writing and researching the next novel. Much, much less time—my dream version got that wrong completely.
5. Let's be honest: in a given day.
6. Yeah, that last line is just too much. Really, it's terrifically hokey: what can I say? At this point I'm just going to own it.



Notes:

1. I mean, to be fair, we were coming from Nebraska, folks: Nebraska.
2. No question that this had a lot to do with landing the “plum job” in the first place.
3. And all of my fellow creative writing grad students—my peers, my pals—would have echoed that. (And many of those folks would still do so today: they wouldn't even have to think about it.)

BACK AT IT

by Cathleen Calbert
Professor, English

I *did* work on my sabbatical. In addition to walking my dogs and questioning the meaning of existence, I drafted a goodly number of new poems (“Oh, Salsa, I too/am *wearry of men and strangers* . . .”). I proofread galley from a small collection of short fiction (alarming titled *The Ten Worst Human Fears*).

As the end of my leave drew near, I put in more time on “schoolwork” too: shaping up my syllabi, coming to campus for committee meetings, and poring over applications for another job search.

Thus, I already felt in full work-mode when I returned to the classroom. No problem! I was way ready: water, notes, new shoes. As the clock ticked to the hour, I nodded at the students seated closest to the door of Craig-Lee 251, clunked my things down on the table by the whiteboard, and looked out at my class.

Then it hit me. I actually had to *teach*.

My writing is connected to what I do in the classroom, of course. Since I teach quite a few creative writing classes, I need to spend time actually being a “creative writer” in order to stay engaged in the process of “literary” composition and to stay current on the production that (if the stars and moon align) leads to publication. Important as well to my program and to my department (I hope) are the administrative and curricular duties to which I recently had been devoting myself. Still, there is quite a divide between these activities and the task of magically turning a group of people into a class.

Come now, I might say to myself. How hard could this be? I’ve taught twenty years’ worth of classes at Rhode Island College alone. I have my bits, my tricks, my rules of three (give a character three specific items of clothing, and the reader will fill in the rest; write something three times in a

poem or do it once: twice just looks like a mistake; and the third rule of three . . . Oops! Like Rick Perry, I forget).

However, there’s no guarantee that my tried and true will be effective yet again. In fact, that’s one of my private jokes. When an assignment has killed in the past but doesn’t go over with a new class, I want to say, “Come on! You love this!”

In a recent poem, one of my students (roughly) quoted Heraclitus: “You can’t step in the same river twice.” Well, true enough. Each experience, even of Entenmann’s consistently delicious chocolate donuts, is, necessarily, different. And when it comes to teaching, the extraordinarily interesting, sometimes maddening, thing is that it’s a really big river. Or snaky lake. Or horizonless ocean.

A class is made up of such a huge number of variables that one can’t be reliably *like* another. Each is its own entity, made up of the instructor’s shifting selves; the various personalities, skills, and interests of the students; the time; the day; the season; the ambience (or lack thereof) of a particular classroom. (Didn’t Heraclitus also go on about how nothing endures except change?)

I’m not saying I never can snap into some prefab lecture or turn to my store of materials from years past. These are some of the benefits of being a “veteran teacher.” Nevertheless, the essential mysteries—how can I reach *this* class? *these* students?—remain. Veteran teacher or no, I can’t rest on my laurels.

In fact, there is no resting. By the end of my first class back, I had joked and cajoled and explained and asked and waved my arms about as though I were an insane airplane and broken into a bona fide (not pleasantly metaphorical or theoretical) sweat.

I knew I was really back at my job then.

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