

L I Z A R D

LASER INSIGHTS ZANY ALTERNATIVES RIVETING DIALOGUE
On Teaching and Learning

Winter 1999

Lizard 47

The Best Teacher I Ever Had

"I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illumined by the lightning-life of the mind—then teaching is the finest work I know."

-Parker J. Palmer, *The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching*

I remember, as a freshman at the University of Kansas, being enthralled in Dr. Clubb's Chaucer class as he (at 72) recited the Canterbury Tales in middle English. I don't know how he captured my attention so completely. I don't know how he inspired me to rise to his challenge to earn an A in his course—a grade he rarely gave and which I earned that semester after studying harder than I ever had before in my life.

A medieval history teacher opened my eyes to the rewards of showing up at your professor's office hour. After receiving a jolting wake up call (a "D" on my first midterm!), I went to his office in desperation. I didn't know how to study for his tests. I tried to remember everything he said in class, to memorize all my notes, and to read through my chapters countless times.

"In studying history," he said, "you need to ask yourself—so what?" The Battle of Hastings in 1066 — so what? Why did it matter? What happened as a result?

My problem was that I didn't know how to make sense of history. I didn't see its relevance. In that meeting, I turned an important corner in my education.

We can learn from any teacher about teaching and learning. I often suggest to GTFs who take our

"Beginnings" teacher training that they imagine they will be teaching the classes they are attending. You pay attention differently with this thought in your head. You not only concentrate on the content of the course, but also your learning experience with an eye toward how the teacher, through his/her personality, knowledge, teaching skills and strategies is orchestrating this experience—for better or for worse.

If we're lucky, we will know from some of our students that we have made a difference. Most of the time we are left wondering. And if you have not already done so, consider trying to contact some of those teachers who have had a powerful and positive effect on your life and letting them know this.

TEP asked several faculty to write about some of the best teachers they ever had.

Favorite Teachers

Cai Emmons

It is 8:25 on a warm June day, five minutes before the official beginning of school. Most kids are still immersed in their dodge ball games, or their Chinese jump rope, or their baseball cards, but Stefan Vogel's fourth graders are crowding around the playground monitor begging for entrance to their classroom. Finally the monitor relents; twenty-four fourth graders rush past her and race up two steep flights to their classroom. Sloughing lunch boxes, book bags, sweaters, they hurry past their desks and gather in a huddle near the front of the classroom, their gazes fixed on a picture taped to the blackboard. The picture, ripped from a magazine, features jagged white shapes — shards of a broken plate? — and swirls of yellow — a broken egg yolk? — against a black backdrop. The

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students regard the image silently, ignoring the strident school bell and the shouts of other students returning from the playground.

“Oh, I get it,” one girl says. She rushes to her desk, pulls out a sheet of lined yellow paper and begins to write.

One by one each of the students becomes sated with looking and heads to a desk. Soon all twenty-four of them are engaged in writing. No one chats. No one giggles. No one plays footsie.

A full twenty minutes elapses before Stefan Vogel, a lean scarecrow of a man with blue eyes incisive as scalpels and short cow-licked hair, ambles into the classroom. He says nothing. He wanders to the window and looks out. The students ignore him.

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At nine o'clock he goes to the front of the classroom. A few hands shoot up. “Can I read first?” “I wanna read first.”

“No let me. Let me read.” The last minute scribblers put down their pencils. Even the most timid students are lobbying.

Mr. Vogel selects four volunteers to read their compositions, all responses to the posted picture. One has written a poem; two have written short vignettes; one has written an essay about broken promises. Mr. Vogel listens to the readers with every muscle. Sometimes he smiles, a goofy smile that takes over his entire face. When each student finishes, Mr. Vogel offers a few brief comments — observations, not judgments. When the session ends and the students

must go to math, a few beg to be allowed to read the following day.

Every day the students in Stefan Vogel's fourth grade class wrote creative compositions first thing in the morning, and through an entire year our enthusiasm for them never paled. It was *our* time to write whatever we wanted and we were proud of our work, proud of our thoughts, proud of the ways we were learning to manipulate words.

Stefan Vogel was probably only twenty-three or twenty-four when he taught that class. How did he galvanize an entire classful of nine-year-olds to feel such passion about writing? What I remember most is how he had a way of making the silence of listening into a moment of communication. His pale blue eyes seemed almost not to blink. His attention never veered from the students' work. He took us seriously, and in doing so he made us feel as if we were his equals. The atmosphere he created was one in which we felt free to take writing risks; we were not inhibited by the judgments which predominated in most of the rest of our school lives, even in elementary school. And yet, the freedom he gave us had clear-cut parameters too. We wrote compositions *every day* and always for a specified period of time. When he brought in *real published writers* at the end of the year to judge a school-wide contest, we were thrilled.

Does Stefan Vogel's teaching style have any relevance for the university professor? A university setting is different, one might argue; judgments need to be made; students need to learn to *critique* and to be *critical*. But even university students can only take those steps when they are in an atmosphere in which they feel comfortable enough and free enough to take risks, an atmosphere very like the one Stefan Vogel was able to create.

Equally influential in my life was a college professor whose surface style was nearly antithetical. Seymour Sarason taught community psychology, a discipline that studies how intervention and change in community groups is best effected. He was a small, intense, white-haired man who went about campus with an entourage of doting graduate students. In his class I began to see why he had such a following. Nothing was simple to Seymour. No fact was just a fact. Seymour questioned *everything*.

All the students in his class had simultaneous placements in community settings—in homes for juvenile offenders, in schools, in mental hospitals, etc.—and we would bring our questions and difficulties to the class. Seymour would sit at the end of our long seminar table leaning forward, his eyes hungry, and, like Stefan Vogel, he would listen intently. Then, just when the students were coming to consensus about a strategy for, say, getting the delinquent girls to stop swearing during play rehearsals he would say, “Why *shouldn’t* they swear?” And we would try to explain to him why swearing was unacceptable and again he would listen, but under his scrutiny our answers began to seem impoverished and circuitous and, after a while we saw he had a point: Why *did* we care if they swore? Shouldn’t we be refocusing our energy onto more important things?

Listen and question, this was Seymour’s mantra. *Always question*. It was a pivotal moment for me when he suggested that the organization of the days of the week might be reconsidered. Why a five-day work week? Why a two-day weekend?

While Stefan Vogel and Seymour Sarasen were very different in age, very different in personality and cultural background, they definitely possessed some important overlapping traits as teachers. First, they were both passionate about what they did and they were able to communicate that passion to their students; second, they were able to achieve a balance between freedom and discipline; and third,

they were both active, creative listeners who heard and responded seriously to their students. The impact of their teaching has been indelible for me; I have annexed their voices as inner voices of my own which I have used over the years to both encourage and question myself.

Once I had a teacher who believed in teaching...

Joy Alandete

Choosing a “best” teacher from my past has turned out to be a more complicated task than I had imagined. When I first considered this assignment, I flashed on a traditional, difficult English professor I had as an undergraduate. He was a demanding teacher—the kind who’d call on you at 9:30 on a rainy morning and expect, well, proof of scholarship, proof of something real and honest. He had a bold willingness to challenge students with the rigors of 16th century literature, an insistence on rhetorical excellence, and an abhorrence of the trembling, flimsy comments students often try to pass off as dialogue.

He wasn’t just difficult, though. It was more than that. He got to know his students, and by knowing us he was able to extend honest,

personal challenges. He cared about our thoughts and work, even when these thoughts and work conflicted with common ideas about the literature we were studying. Mostly, he cared that we considered and questioned and attempted with all the energy and talent that is so often left latent on the campus of a big university.

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I am hesitant, though, to assign this professor “best” status. He didn’t employ innovative teaching strategies; instead, he used the old style: reading quizzes, bi-weekly essays, exams that could make even the most confident students cower, and spend the entire testing time in the classroom. In short, he was rather typical of what one would imagine a professor to be. What made him unique—his energy, interest, and commitment—weren’t unusual, either; they were qualities you would imagine all teachers have, or should. It feels curious to praise a teacher at a large university simply for being a

teacher. This gets to the heart of my hesitation: crediting this teacher—this one who is begging to be called “best” in my mind—challenges me to reflect as much on what other teachers *didn’t* have as it does on any particular quality he possessed.

Teaching seems to be as unique an endeavor as any: full of oddness and personality, shaped heavily by the teachers’ experience of life. I suppose that if I condense the pedagogical lesson I have learned in this reflection, I discover, mostly, that once I had a teacher who believed in teaching, believed in the power of the individual student, and believed that something great could be born of that sacred relationship between student and mentor.

My Best Teachers

Gail Unruh

I have often thought that those of us who have ventured into the field of education have had more than one memorable teacher. In my case, three teachers, all close together in my educational career, helped set the tone and direction for my later efforts.

Jim Colbert, my high school world history teacher was the first person to make me truly intrigued with history. Beyond that, however, I must confess that I have few concrete memories of the subject matter. His style, congeniality, humanness, and general caring are the features that stand out in my mind. I remember spirited discussions in his classes, but more than that I remember being encouraged to explore and discuss, to do something more than simply memorize and spit back information. At a time when my father cautioned me not to disagree with a student teacher assisting with Colbert’s class, Colbert actually praised my willingness to speak up. He made each of us seem alive and important. In turn, we made his class live, and we gained more than what an initial exposure to world history might have offered.

With Colbert’s encouragement, I moved to Adolf Bakun’s advanced placement U. S. history class and the second of my most memorable teachers. Bakun’s style was different, but the result was similar. We learned a good deal about American history, but his ability to demand much without pressuring, to draw out without forcing, to tweak without belittling, are the features I remember most clearly. The richness of historical controversy came alive. I recall being amazed about how alive history was and is. And I recall feeling that my participation in the debate, even if in only a small way, was exciting. I milked the opportunity, staying late and needing a pass to get to English class. Also, I became less satisfied with my math and science courses, which up to that time had been the cornerstone of my effort. That class and that teacher set me on a path to pursue history as a course of study.

My experience with two quality teachers in high school meant that I entered college with a major already chosen. Though I lacked a clear idea of what I wanted to do with that field, one professor, Meyer Nathan, continued to fire my mind. As I viewed him then, Nathan was an intense, quirky guy who was also active in the ACLU and the NAACP, organizations about which I knew relatively little at that time. Though he taught a large lecture class, he learned the names of all the students. We weren’t bodies, we weren’t numbers, we were individuals and he sought to get us involved with history and with each other. His intensity might have been intimidating, but it was infectious. We cared and he helped us to care. History and the university were the vehicles to get us to realize that people were uniquely valuable.

The combination of these experiences with three different teachers altered my life. With no attempt on my part to design a set of interrelated experiences, I benefited from them and continue to benefit from them as they resonate in my awareness.

In Appreciation of the Trust of D.J. and Dr. Ryan

Scott Allen

My best teacher let me help rig the Sunfish and showed me how to jump onto the rudderboard if I tipped the boat over or turtled it. He said that whenever I finished making the beds and cleaning the bathrooms, if the guests weren't using the little sailboat, I could.

My best college classroom teacher similarly trusted that I would learn what needed to be learned. She created a safe environment for exploration and invited new and different thoughts. Course assignments included "AHA!" papers (for significant insights or realizations) and a few self-directed projects. She trusted that the information she provided would find its way into our projects. She trusted that the motivation to discover still existed in us when our minds were stimulated. She trusted, I believe, that some of us would learn things that would fill more than the term-ending blue book.

And surprise, surprise long after most lecture material has huddled away in the shadows below the desks of my brain, mental mementos from that class still hold places atop those desks; frequent reminders: my AHA's.

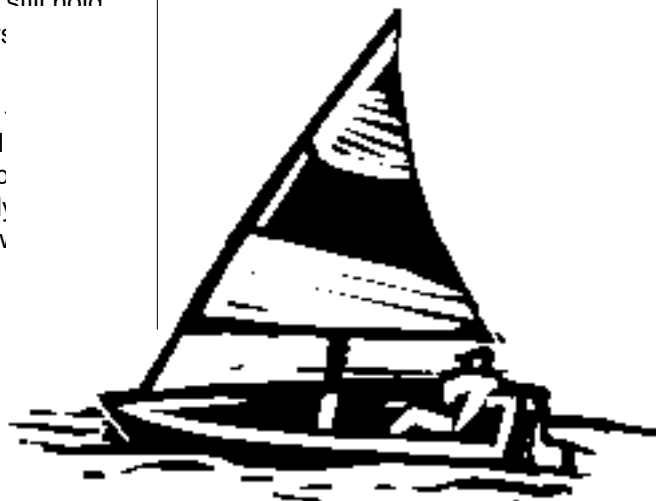
I also remember how I learned in that class: confident direct instruction, exploration, and experience. I look for formal and informal opportunities to pass that on to others. Yet, it seems I only when I remember to not teach defensively; to genuine learning and put that confidence in of the learners.

The Power of Listening, The Power of Respect

Michael Sweet

Memories of the best teacher I have ever had are colored by the fact that he was also my graduate school advisor, a relationship that is always powerful and frequently complex. Graduate school is intense for everyone: a time when we are pushed to the limit with the goal of developing ourselves as scholars (which means learning—for the most part—what and how to argue.) But John Vohs made a life-long impression on me not because of how well he could speak, but how well he could listen. In a system that emphasizes speaking over listening, falsifying over internalizing, the effort John devoted to listening—and to making it clear that his students were being heard—made him a *powerful* teacher.

John's listening extended beyond paraphrasing and



active listening. He also listened to the social needs students brought into the classroom and used them as raw material to build a positive instructional experience. Using a rubber-banded stack of index cards, his own personal shorthand system, and regular personal review sessions early in the term, he would learn and use the first names of about 100 of the 140 students in his lecture section every quarter. He felt the extra effort was worth the degree of intimacy that using those names in class generated.

He was right. I assisted him for a term, and facilitating discussions using students' names transformed the experience into something more personal, interactive and relevant than any lecture class I have ever seen. Not only did using names make facilitating logistically possible, but *bothering to learn them in the first place* set into motion an upward spiral of respect between himself and his students.

John's ability to address his students respectfully by name made common teaching problems easier to manage. Once I saw him handle a pair of disruptive young men who were talking loudly during class. They were sitting in the middle of the lecture hall, and John could see they were distracting students around them. He paused in his lecture and said—"You know, I want to stop and talk about the social climate of a communication event. In any communication situation, the social climate—the mood of the room—has a lot to do with what can or cannot happen there.

People talk about a group of people

or a discussion being particularly 'warm.' Now, I am about to do something that will chill the climate in here, so let's see what that feels like ...Jason, Nathan, I need you to not talk so much and so loudly while there are people around you trying to listen. I can see that you are distracting them. Can you help me out with that? Great. Thanks. (pause) There, do you feel that? Because I singled them out amidst a large group and made negative comments about their behavior, suddenly it feels stiff and icy in here. It would be something we'd need to work on before we were willing to take any risks together. Of course, I can do this to Jason and Nathan because we are friends, but social climate is something to pay attention to—a powerful aspect of communication. Now, where were we?..."

This example also demonstrates the alacrity with which John could turn a potentially unpleasant and power-laden moment into something of value for everyone—a kind of teaching judo in which he was an unparalleled master.

So, in the end, what did he *do* that I could point to and recommend to other teachers? He learned his students' names, he used his students' names, and he listened. It doesn't seem like such a tremendous to-do list, and yet I am continually amazed at how hard it can be to accomplish, and how magical the outcome when it is.

Ten Minutes to Technology

Sharon Yoder

Have you decided to make a commitment to using technology only to find that it takes so much time to set up that you use too much valuable class time just getting ready to begin? The ten minutes between classes just isn't enough time, and seldom do you have the luxury of having the classroom empty the hour before you begin teaching.

I have been using a wide variety of technology in my classes—videotapes, overheads, computers and projectors. At times I use all three. That means getting a videotape set up, adjusting and focusing an overhead, connecting a computer and projector and perhaps making an Internet connection as well. I have developed some strategies that might be helpful if you are just beginning to incorporate technology into your teaching.

1. If possible, get into the assigned classroom before your course begins. Be sure you know where outlets are, how to turn on any equipment, and where any connections you may need are located. Practice setting up any equipment you want to use. Practice more than once. It's a good

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idea to take some notes, too, so you have something to refer to in the rush at the beginning of class. Be sure to check that any media you are using is visible from anyplace in the classroom.

2. Ask your students to save individual questions until after you have completed the set up for that day.
3. Be gently aggressive about getting into your classroom 10 minutes before the class. Negotiate with the instructor who has the class before you and explain the complexity of your set up needs and the importance of being able to use your allotted pre-class 10 minutes.
4. Don't neglect the lowly overhead projector. Your lessons will be much more effective if you take the time to be sure that the projector is adjusted correctly and placed so that all of the students in the classroom can see well. Limit the amount of text on your transparencies and use type that is large enough (24 pts.) to be read from the back of the room.
5. If you are using videotape, be sure you cue your tape before you go to class. If you are using several segments, consider putting each on a separate tape that you can have cued and ready to go. Another helpful trick is to purchase a universal remote and set it up for the classroom you are using. This allows you to more easily control the VCR and TVs.
6. Computer equipment and an appropriate projector can be the most complex set up challenge. My solution has been to set up a small AV cart with everything I need—disks, computer, projector and the necessary cables. I include an extension chord and a long cable for Internet connections. My cart can also include videotapes I might use, transparencies, and any other material I need to teach the class.
7. If you are using a computer, set up an electronic folder containing everything that you want to use in the class so you don't have to take valuable class time hunting for the files you need. Put shortcuts or aliases on your desktop so you can quickly get to applications for files you want to use. Better yet, get the files you want to use open and ready to go before you start class. Then put your machine into a sleep mode rather than turning it off. Note that sometimes a machine will have to be restarted in order to make a network

connection. Check your equipment carefully before you take it to class.

All of this may seem overwhelming—and it is the first few times. If possible have a GTF or a technology-savvy student help you the first time that you plan to use technology. With practice this process will become much easier and smoother and you and your students will be well-positioned to take advantage of the best uses of instructional technology.



3 Suggestions for Large Classes from UCSB

Personalize, Personalize, Personalize.

Learn and use the names of your students. As difficult as this is, it goes a long way toward personalizing the class. Use seating charts, require students to attend office hours in small groups, take pictures of the class (with student permission), arrive to class early and greet students as they enter, and converse with students over e-mail. Above all, be yourself. Students frequently say that they would like to “get to know” their professors.

Ask Students for Feedback.

Early in the quarter ask students to write a few sentences about how the class is going or about how the class could be improved. Be clear and explicit about what you want students to learn and occasionally, at the end of class, ask them what they’ve learned (have them write for one-minute about this at the end of class). Require group office hours with you or with TAs and pass around a sign-up sheet early in the quarter. Give a short answer test question at the beginning of class that tests information from the previous lecture; put the

answers on the board and discuss them. Give a mid-quarter student evaluation questionnaire.

Ask TEP about the Midterm Evaluation of Teaching (MAT). Call or e-mail (6-2177, gcooper@oregon) to request a hardcopy or locate the on-line MAT at this address:

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~tep/services/mat.html>

Give Feedback Early and Often:

Students need to know how they’re doing, particularly in a large class. Give short essay questions at the beginning or end of class, then begin the next class by reading one or two exemplary answers. This primes the class, gives feedback, and prepares students for taking exams. Require outlines and drafts of term papers on specified dates, well before the final due date. After every fifteen minutes of lecturing, ask students to discuss a thoughtful question with the person next to them and have two or three students tell their response to the whole class. After lecturing for half the class, ask students to write the most important themes you’ve mentioned; write your answers on the overhead and let them compare their lists with yours!

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