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CHALK

TEACHING & FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

AN EXPERIENCE THAT CHANGED MY TEACHING

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This issue features submissions from faculty who participated in the 2011 Virtual Roundtable: "An Experience that Changed My Teaching," organized by the Wittenberg Faculty Development Board.

[Teaching Stories and Case Studies]

By Ty Buckman (Wittenberg University)

Anthropologists have gathered evidence from around the world, and from the near and distant past, to demonstrate the principle that communities are formed around common stories. (Whether the story or the community comes first is still a matter of some debate in the field.) Given enough time, those stories ossify into myths, which further ground a community in a common identity or around a core set of beliefs or values or shared experiences.

From this basic anthropological premise, it requires no great conceptual leap to observe that the act of sharing stories is community building, almost invisibly, almost without any further design or intention.

Several times when my wife Jody and I lived in Minnesota, we had the good fortune of attending a taping of Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" in St. Paul. To tell a personal story to a theater filled with the dimly lit faces of strangers (not to mention the countless members of what used to be called the 'radio audience') requires a talent for public self disclosure that most of us not trained in the dramatic arts, or who were not born into the Facebook generation, lack. I think knowing with whom you are sharing your story changes the way you tell it, as well as the likelihood that someone else will respond with her or his own story.

As those of you who have to schedule events are painfully aware, getting ten or even five faculty together in the same place at the same time is a counter-cultural act. As we gather together less often, as our store of social capital is depleted, as we perceive ourselves to have less unassigned time than we used to, we necessarily tell fewer stories to each other. What do we do in the face of these challenges? We adapt.

Most of the teaching stories in this issue were submitted to a Faculty Develop Board 'virtual roundtable' conducted in the fall of 2011, in which faculty were invited to share their reflections on 'an experience that changed my teaching.' About thirty faculty participants signed on to read or contribute accounts of formative teaching experiences inside or outside their own or a colleague's classroom. What follows is a sample of those stories plus a few 'case studies' intended to focus our attention as teachers on what we share and what we can learn from each other's practice.

As you'll see, these brief reflections from colleagues in a variety of disciplines demonstrate equal parts pedagogical ambition and hard-earned humility, the inevitable result of taking seriously the goal of becoming better teachers.

[The Power of Telling Stories]

By Catherine E. Waggoner (Wittenberg University)

This is a "teaching story" about the value of teaching students to tell stories. I have always known the pivotal role that storytelling plays in building community, creating bodies of knowledge, and developing identities. I grew up in the Mississippi Delta, experiencing firsthand the mesmerizing power of a well-crafted story, and appreciating the merits of a smartly coined turn of phrase and a particularly nuanced cadence.

...stories are used not just to entertain, but to establish claims and generate knowledge...

As a professor of communication (rhetoric) now, I want my students to understand the significance of storytelling in our American culture in an academic sense, especially for the liberal arts. We learn about the narrative paradigm—how stories are used not just to entertain, but to establish claims and generate knowledge—and how critical thinking involves dissecting stories to understand their particular configurations and their effects. What appears to be benign, comical tall tales may actually be potent vehicles for realignment of power structures, and what are seemingly trivial legends passed from generation to generation may really be compelling conduits for authority. After analyzing the potency of storytelling in general, I encourage students to use stories in their own writing and speaking, not just to establish rapport at the beginning of their speeches, but as forms of proof in their written and oral arguments.

Thus, it is not unusual for storytelling to be featured in my class discussions. Admittedly, however, the emphasis has been primarily on reading and analyzing others' stories, maintaining a nice critical distance in appropriate academic fashion. To a significant degree, I shy away from wanting students to disclose their own stories in too great detail, fearful that my classroom will dissolve into emotive therapy sessions. So, when the opportunity presented itself to have my Gender & Communication students engage in an assignment that involved their telling "coming out" stories (albeit not their own, but others'), I was very hesitant. I admit that the thought of experiential learning has always made me a bit squeamish, primarily because it can be messy both in terms of getting students to participate and in evaluating their participation. Taking students outside of the classroom for various learning "field" experiences in rhetoric courses just seems like a lot of work (and often not very rigorous work, I judged unfairly) with little return. But then, performance studies scholar and friend, E. Patrick Johnson, came to Wittenberg, and the opportunity arose to incorporate his methodology (i.e., interviewing and performing) into my Gender & Communication course.

A PUBLIC PERFORMANCE HAS THE CAPACITY TO AFFECT CHANGE

We were studying performance theory and gender, so how could I ignore the chance to

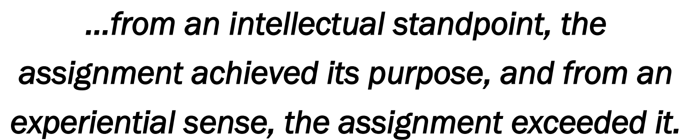
(Continued on page 3)

[The Power of Telling Stories, continued]

have students apply what we had been reading/thinking about with this visiting scholar in town? Nudged by colleagues, I structured a course assignment that had students interview members of Equality Springfield, a community advocacy group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people (LGBT), to hear their "coming out" stories. Then, students were to transcribe those stories, thinking carefully about the content and structure of those intimate milestone stories, and finally—perform those stories on stage with a microphone in a public venue in downtown Springfield.

As E. Patrick Johnson explains and beautifully demonstrates himself, such a public performance has the capacity to affect change in a manner that is not "scholarship-lite" (for the audience, the performers, and the owners of the stories) in ways that other methodologies/ academic approaches simply cannot. Yet, this was a daunting project with a steep learning curve for the students and high stakes, in my mind, for a number of people. What would the LGBT "owners" of the stories think about how their stories were performed? What would be the cost of asking my students, many of whom were quite introverted and somewhat sheltered in terms of grappling with complicated issues of sexuality, and none of whom were theatrical types, to step out of their comfort zones in performing those stories in front of their owners? And, how in the world would I evaluate this project?

With reservations intact, I nonetheless plunged ahead in a leap of faith that the result would be worth it. And, it was—on a number of levels. Overtly heterosexual students, dare I say "football-player types," embodied the poignant stories of their LGBT counterparts, demonstrating the complicated politics of visibility much more than any lecture or reading could achieve.



...from an intellectual standpoint, the assignment achieved its purpose, and from an experiential sense, the assignment exceeded it.

The public sharing of those stories, significant mostly—and ironically—due to their mundaneness ("they're just like us," my students said), worked to congeal community in ways that I would never have predicted. In short, from an intellectual standpoint, the assignment achieved its purpose, and from an experiential sense, the assignment exceeded it.

The students understood gender/sexuality and the associated politics at a level they simply could not have without embodying the stories. The LGBT owners of the stories seemed gratified to witness their own landmark stories afforded their due significance, even in amateurish dramatic fashion. The audience experienced an intimate interchange between performers and story owners that brought to life the intricate entanglements of gender/sexuality and their complicated consequences.

I left that evening's event knowing for certain that the students would remember the lessons of that assignment far beyond any final paper or course exam. And, that's the power of telling stories.

[One Size Fits All]

By Doug Andrews (Wittenberg University)

A few years ago I picked up the bass and sought private lessons to complement my self-instruction. I am definitely not a professional musician, nor do I have the ambition to become a professional musician. But, all modesty aside, I know quite a bit more about music than the average person. I was just new to that particular instrument, though I've played many instruments and studied music formally and informally for years, both theory and practice, with sight singing, ear training, composition, and so on. Now, as an adult learner, I am definitely not a typical music student seeking private lessons. Whenever soliciting instruction, I try to communicate my special needs and abilities. One instructor I met said he could definitely work with me on my terms and in consideration of my experience.

However, that's not how the lesson went. He started with what was essentially the first lesson for somebody who was totally new not only to the bass but to music as well, and who was embarking on a lifelong commitment to become a master of the instrument.

As far as he knew, this was what the first lesson was always like. Tailoring the help to the student's background and abilities was clearly foreign to him. It was as though I, as a professional statistical consultant, would show up for a focused assignment with a new client and instead of helping the client assess what she or he needs to do, I would just launch into the first lecture of the first introductory course for students who want to eventually get PhDs in statistics.

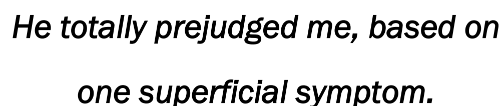
On the way home from the one and only lesson with this instructor, I considered the extent to which I do this in my interactions with students as well, and in the way I conceive my curriculum.

[Prejudging]

By Doug Andrews (Wittenberg University)

About a decade ago, when I was seeking a diagnosis for some knee pain, I set up an appointment with a sports medicine doctor in Dayton. He walked into the examination room and immediately announced, "So, another die-hard runner who just won't give it up, huh?"

Uh… no. Not at all. In fact, that was almost the opposite of my story. I've always just been about fitness, health, and wellness. I was into running, biking, swimming and nearly anything for a good workout. But I am non-competitive, maybe even anti-competitive, and I am not wed to any particular activity. If running was what was causing my pain, then I was more than willing to give it up and focus on the other activities I enjoy (which is exactly what happened).



I can imagine that many (or even most!) of this doctor's patients are indeed die-hard runners who just won't give it up. But I sure wasn't. He totally prejudged me, based on one superficial symptom. At that point, how could I possibly trust this physician's eventual diagnosis of my knee and what was causing the pain? How could I possibly trust him to help me?

On the drive home, I considered the extent to which I form presumptions when my students come to me for help. "So, another kid who just doesn't understand sampling distributions, huh?" I don't think I do it this crudely, but I've certainly been on the lookout for inadvertently prejudging my own students since this incident.

[The Truths of Chemistry]

By David Finster (Wittenberg University)

Many years ago, before the advent of electronic online homework, I would administer tiny quizzes at the beginning of some of my classes as a means of holding students accountable (before the exam...) for "staying current" in the course. At the end of the first quiz, I would announce to the class that these would be graded immediately (for quick feedback, and to eliminate the tedious task of grading for me...) and that they should "exchange their quizzes with themselves." This last directive was met with puzzled looks, of course. "Yes, you'll grade your own quizzes." This led to a short sermonette in class about "honesty in science," whereupon I would discuss how it is absolutely essential that scientists are honest since that is a bedrock principle of how science has to work.

I'll skip the full sermonette here: "So," I would say, "the only way to find out if you are an honest scientist (or not) is to be put in a situation where being dishonest is both tempting and easy. Grading your own quiz is such a situation. What kind of scientist do you wish to be? Today is the day you decide." More discussion ensued. And, I did not "re-grade" the quizzes; I simply recorded the score that the students gave themselves.

"I've never had a teacher trust me before"

I do not assume that some students won't cheat. We all know that some students cheat, and many don't even consider this to be wrong. We live in a culture where lying is normative, and perhaps even expected, in many circumstances. (I have grave reservations about the symbolic and practical use of an Honor System on campus.) But, finally, here's the point of this story: one student, after first taking one of the quizzes described above, came up to me after class and thanked me for doing the quizzes this way. She said: "I've never had a teacher trust me before." Wow.

So, I still don't like the world that I live in some days. Our cultural norms do not align with my values. I tell my students that I will never (consciously) lie to them or, at least when I do lie to them, I'll tell them that I am lying.* And, I expect them not to lie to me. They do, I'm sure, at times. And, I'm sure that some of them would and will cheat no matter how diligently I set up my courses to prevent this. I know of other faculty who go to great lengths to deter cheating; I can only wonder that the whole course becomes the game of preventing/detecting cheating vs. "getting away with it." This is education? Alas. An education should be about more than getting points and grades. I reluctantly accept the level of cheating that likely occurs in my classes for the benefit of those students who would otherwise build an honest relationship with me. I choose to be a "colleague" (in the professor-student relationship meaning) more so than a "cop."

ONE CAN'T BUILD TRUST UNTIL TRUST IS OFFERED

Final note: I don't do this anymore in my chemistry classes since I don't do the quizzes. We talk about honesty, though, at some point. However, I am doing this kind of grade-your-own-quiz in my WittSem. A quick scan of the quiz grades makes it utterly obvious that, at least, many folks grade themselves fairly. But, one can't build trust until trust is offered. And, it is almost certainly betrayed at times. I don't know how else to do this, although the betrayal always smarts. I suppose I shouldn't take it personally.

*This raises the notion of a developmental curriculum in chemistry where the "truths" of general chemistry courses are replaced with "better truths" in upper-level classes. The "lesser truths" are, in fact, gross (perhaps even egregious!) approximations. When is a gross approximation a lie? My advanced inorganic course begins with the statement, "most of what I told you in the general chemistry course was a lie." (And then we discuss what I mean by this.) It becomes the mantra of the course as we replace simplistic models with more sophisticated models. All these theories and ideas are "models"; can a model be a lie? It's a *model*!

[Superhero Powers]

By Barbara Austin (Wittenberg University)

I need to give a little context in order for you to understand the event that changed my teaching. About 20 years ago, after graduating from college, I was fortunate to get a job at a small but very well-funded lab doing corporate research and development. I worked really long hours and so I am not sure why I responded to an ad to teach the MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test) part-time in the evening. It could have had something to do with my crazy French boss after whom I am convinced the Nicholas Cage character in *Vampire's Kiss* was modeled. (I want it to go on record that I was not the only one at my company who thought my boss treated me like the Maria Conchita Alonso character...)

Regardless of my reasons, shortly after applying I found myself working part-time for The Princeton Review (TPR) teaching pre-meds how to get a good score on the MCAT. At the time I worked for TPR, the cost of the course was slightly more than the cost of a semester of tuition at the local university. Class sizes were limited to 15 students (no exceptions) and as long as students did all of their homework and attended every class they could repeat the course for free if they wanted a higher score on the MCAT. If students had to miss class, they could pay for a make-up at $60 per hour in order to keep the guarantee. It should also be noted that with my hourly wage (which was a little bit less than twice my current hourly wage), the break-even point for my office was 10 students per section.

Naturally, one of my most important duties as an instructor was to check that students had done their homework and keep careful attendance records. TPR lost a significant amount of money when they had repeaters (getting no money in), and the repeaters forced them to run sections with less than 10 students. Not being the office manager, I was less concerned about the office making money than I was about keeping my job (at which I was making a really good part-time wage), which was dependent on good student evaluations. So, as a gatekeeper to a potentially free course, I was often put into the position of deciding after how many minutes absent I would require students to pay for the $60 per hour make-up sessions. Being teachers, you can imagine the things I heard students say about why they were 15, 30, or 45 minutes late to class in order to buy my sympathy and a waiver. Similarly, you can also imagine things I heard students say about why they hadn't done their homework (also required to repeat the course for free).

Very rapidly after beginning work for TPR, when some of my students would give me excuses for missing class or not doing homework, I started hearing a voice in my head singing, "LYYYYIINGGG." Usually when I heard this voice, I told myself that it was the pessimistic, cynical, raised-in-Chicago-in-a-family-of-attorneys inner voice speaking and that I needed to have more goodwill towards my fellow man. So I would ignore the voice and use my instructor's discretion to waive the infraction. But I began to notice a pattern. After hearing "the voice," it would often happen that, within a short period of time, another student would mention something or I would hear students talking during the break. I would realize that I wasn't being cynical—the students really had been lying to me when I suspected it.

I will never forget the incident that confirmed my "true" identity in this capacity. I had a student, Jen, who was habitually late to class. It happened during a difficult semester with a lot of blonde sorority girls; I took the fact that it happened nearly every class period as a sign of disrespect for me and the course. Jen "did" her homework but it was never more than obligatory completion. One Thursday she came to me at the beginning of class and wanted to know if she could leave 30 minutes early because her sister had been having allergy problems for a long time and had finally found a doctor that was able to diagnose her; they were going to get a call on the prognosis at 8:00 P.M. and she wanted to be home to be part of the family conversation. Immediately, the voice inside me screamed, "LYING," so loudly I am surprised that sound did not come out of my mouth. But, being an allergy sufferer myself, being concerned about a "group effect" of student evaluations, and (hopefully) wanting to believe the best of this student, I said, "OK."

The following Tuesday before class another student, who had also asked for permission to leave early the previous Thursday in order to attend a talk given by Maya Angelou, was telling some of the students about how great the talk had been. Jen walked in, realized what they were talking about, and immediately confirmed what an inspiring event it had been. I think she also quickly realized that I was listening in and knew that she had lied to me the week before about the phone call; during the break, she came and told me how great it was to be with her family when they heard about her sister's allergy diagnosis, and since the phone call hadn't taken very long, she went to hear the tail-end of

(Continued on page 7)

[Superhero Powers, continued]

Maya Angelou's talk. Too late. Jen's hurried adjustment in her story made me realize: I am a superhero—I always know when my students are lying to me.

Since that day, my relationship with my students has changed completely. On the first day of each course, I tell them the story of my self-discovery of being a superhero and that I have superhero powers. I admit that there are limitations to my powers—they only extend to the context of being my students in a course. I also tell them that every once in a while I will have a student test my powers by lying to me. I caution my students that I will not openly confront them about lying but will know inside that they are lying and will think less of them.

I feel that the honesty that results from disclosing my superhero powers has made classroom dynamics different from other courses. Students do not try to bluff their way through class discussions or written work. If they haven't done the readings or assignments, they will either come to me before class and let me know that they haven't done them or, as I call on them in class, they openly admit they haven't done them (and usually apologize).

It is hard for me to describe the feeling of being a teacher in a situation in which you know that your students are going to be completely honest with you about what they have or haven't done. I greatly appreciate the trust that my students place in me in being honest when they have been less than diligent and tried less than they know they could or should. I hope that the experience of being in a space in which they can not only admit that they messed up or fallen short, but also be valued in spite of these shortcomings, is an emotional respite from their usual experience in the larger world.

[AH-HA]

By Pamela Schindler (Wittenberg University)

A few years ago, after I'd been coaching WittCAM projects for about 20 years, one of my best students made a comment in passing that a particular class she was taking was not very stimulating: she had no control of what or how she was learning. It got me thinking about how much control I give my students in regular classes, outside of WittCAM projects (where they have full control of methodology).

A few weeks later, Jo Wilson asked me to teach an honors course. I called the course Contemporary Issues in Leadership; it was built around reading multiple books and discussing them in significant depth. What I wanted was a course where students had extensive control over how they learned. My teaching decision: give the students responsibility for developing the daily discussion plans and managing each day's discussion. It was life-changing teaching for me.

The ideas they came up with for covering the material were far different than I would have ever thought. One of the students was an education major; she chose to build her discussion around a series of games. Another student was an art major; he chose to have students in the class create collages from magazine pictures then discuss the collages. The list of ideas and methods was extensive. Some did the standard Q & A approach, but far more chose ways that were creative, inventive, and involved extensive preparation on their part and the part of their classmates. The depth of discussions was also far greater than I would have demanded; the discussions pursued tangents far more often than a more teacher-controlled class would have and willed truly enlightening breakthroughs in understanding.

I STEPPED FAR OUT OF MY COMFORT ZONE WITH SOME OF THESE APPROACHES

In subsequent courses…not honors this time…I've used those same techniques and they have worked remarkably better than what I had done before. I stepped far out of my comfort zone with some of these approaches. The level of class engagement, the level of concept understanding and retention, was worth every moment of discomfort.

To give control of the whole course, or at least some class sessions, to the students is the most powerful "AH-HA" moment of my teaching career. I'm just sorry it didn't happen earlier.

[The Jolt]

By Ty Buckman (Wittenberg University)

Early in the spring semester of 2000, during my second semester at Wittenberg, I walked into my English 200, Introduction to Literary Studies class in a testy mood. The class wasn't going particularly well. Some of the pedagogical moves that had worked well for me at my previous campus weren't working at Witt. I tentatively (and conveniently) concluded that a lack of preparation by my students was a big part of the problem. This was the gateway course for the major, these were future English majors and minors, and no one seemed to be engaging with the material, and some (many?) seemed not to be doing the reading at all. The brand new Hollenbeck classroom was arranged in a circle from a previous class and I quickly took a seat and asked the first question. No response. I asked another question. No response. In exasperation, I asked if anyone had done the reading for class that day. I surveyed an arc of twenty-five students looking at me glumly and decided in that moment to take decisive action. I told them, with obvious frustration, that I was cancelling class on the spot and that I didn't want to see them again until they were prepared to discuss the material. It seemed at the time like a good pedagogical risk, a way to send a jolt of electricity into a groggy class.

Two days later I was reminded that risky teaching practices fall under a special provision of the law of unintended consequences, as a very earnest young woman came to my office with an add/drop slip. She had returned to college after a few years off to serve as a nanny to her niece and nephew. She had worked it out to watch them part-time and attend classes part-time, but she had very recently decided that her schedule did not afford her sufficient time to prepare for her classes after all. My collective reprimand of the class had convinced her that she was not ready to be a student again. I flailed helplessly: her quiz scores were good, I reminded her. She probably had prepared for class that day, I offered hopefully. I wasn't talking about students like her when I canceled the class. And so on, to no avail. She dropped the class and, surely for a variety of reasons, took another two years off from school.* Since that day, I have endeavored never to broadcast my disappointment with a class as a whole, because it seems that the individuals in the class who are listening most carefully to the message, who feel the sting of it, are the very ones to whom it least applies.

**The student in question eventually resumed her education and graduated three years ago from Wittenberg with her English major. She now teaches high school English.*

[The Past Didn't Go Anywhere]

By Emily Ravenwood (Wittenberg University)

Back some years ago, I was a bright, innocent young teacher. I loved my work. I loved my students. The whole world was full of possibilities, and so I did crazy-wild things like giving one of Melville's most challenging novels, *The Confidence Man*, to my non-majors intro course and chasing it with *Harry Potter*. I used Neil Gaiman's graphic novels to teach about Puritan New England and to compare with William Bradford. I had complete faith that, if I just let my students know I believed they could handle this, they would live up to my belief—and they never let me down. Heck, when I was feeling under the weather, I went to teach a class because I knew they'd give me an energy boost.

One year, I thought it was time to try something really interesting and challenging. I'd teach a writing-and-culture class using non-traditional texts in non-traditional formats! We'd start out with the audio CD, *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere*, a collection of spoken-word songs by Utah Phillips and Ani Difranco; it was chock-full of labor union history, anarchist philosophy, and commentary on politics and education, all wrapped up in wry humor. Just the thing to appeal to a class of second years!

Unfortunately, that was the fall of 2001. I have never seen a class shut down that fast and that hard, not before and not since. I felt shocked, stunned, even betrayed. No matter what I did, no matter what exercises I attempted, no matter what feedback I gave, a whole class save one single student flatly refused to engage with that text. They refused to parse the actual content of some "songs."

Eventually, we moved on to the movie *Pleasantville* and the class recovered a little, but my faith in my students had taken a body blow. For years after that, I refused to teach any contemporary text that was directly political or ethical because I no longer believed that my students could handle it. No, I thought, I'd have to come at them sideways, and teach texts that showed such issues in a historical setting. Maybe that way I could at least get them to consider the general ideas.

In the end, I suppose it worked out well enough. These days I put a very strong emphasis on historical context, and how the past is connected to the present. As Phillips said, "The past didn't go anywhere. It's right here, right now." I've never taught that text again, but it's in every class I teach. As the years passed, I even regained some of my faith in my students. I believe, again, that if I just give them the texts and let them run, we'll get to all the important points one way or another. They'll see what's going on in the story, they'll listen to the classmate who points out challenging readings, and if I just pave the way a bit the non-privileged students will emerge from their defensive bunkers of silent watchfulness and be listened to when they speak. I believe that again.

But it took a while.

[Learning Through My Mistakes]
An Advising Case Study

By Mary Jo Zembar (Wittenberg University)

For the past three years I have been in a position at my institution to assist the Assistant Provost of Academic Services in working with students who are at academic risk. This position has prompted me to review the literature and read about the factors that make up effective advising, understand the challenges many faculty face to be good advisors, and reflect on my own advising skills. I must confess that my approach to advising had been of the traditional sort with an emphasis on understanding the graduation requirements of my university and the best way to navigate students through a major or minor in psychology. There had been at my institution, as is the case at many universities, very little advisor training or encouragement to expand faculty advising skills and very little incentive or reward for doing so. However, in my current position, I became self-motivated to understand best practices in effective advising and to begin to develop rubrics that my colleagues could use when engaging in academic coaching with their academically-challenged advisees. This advising case study demonstrates the valuable lessons I learned while embarking on this journey to become a more effective, intentional, and humane advisor.

J.W. had been suspended from the university because of poor academic performance, and upon his re-admittance was encouraged by the Assistant Provost to meet with me for academic support. I asked J.W. to complete a checklist that would help him identify barriers to his academic success and return it to me before our meeting. From his completed checklist it appeared that J.W.'s chosen major required him to take classes that regularly consisted of homework assignments designed to facilitate the mastery of certain concepts. J.W. frequently did not complete these homework and lab assignments or, if he did, did not do so in a timely manner. This lack of homework completion was significantly affecting his grades and his ability to attain the required GPA in his major courses.

Based on J.W.'s self-analysis, I designed an intervention plan that I thought (or hoped) might work for him. At our first meeting I explained to J.W. how I had interpreted his checklist and presented to him my action plan for his academic success. After politely listening to me for a time, he began to gently explain why much of what I had proposed did not and would not work for him. His response was not one of stubborn resistance, but rather one that explained more fully why he had difficulty completing the homework and why he had difficulty reaching out to others for assistance. I realized that I had committed a common error; one made by many faculty, by assuming that I knew why J.W. was not succeeding and that if he only worked harder (like I did when I was an undergraduate) then his performance would improve. I made assumptions about why J.W. was not succeeding and concluded that if only J.W. would stop being lazy, or stop partying so much, or stop playing video games, and do what I told him to do, then he could be a student LIKE I WAS. One can hardly blame faculty for making this critical error; after all, in the absence of any training, one's self is a reasonable standard. The problem with using our former student selves as the standard is that we most likely were *not* the norm. On a normal curve of student achievement, most academics with Ph.D.'s are scattered at the upper end of the curve, not at the mean where the majority of our students lie, and certainly not below the mean.

[PROPOSE REMEDIES THAT HE COULD RECOGNIZE AS DOABLE]

So what I learned from J.W. was that in order to be a more effective advisor, I should not prejudge, or make assumptions about why a student is not succeeding based on my own student experience or learning style. Rather, I must meet J.W. where HE is and recognize that his self-identified barriers are real and debilitating regardless of what I or anyone else thinks or feels about their legitimacy. Not only should I have avoided making assumptions about why he was not achieving, but I also should have avoided making assumptions about what interventions would work for him. What I did was throw my action plan out the window and ask him a series of questions that allowed me, with his contributions, to identify specific problem areas and propose

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remedies, with his input, that he could recognize as doable *for him* and would likely lead to *his* success.

[Learning Through My Mistakes, continued]

This case study demonstrates that the academic struggles of many students are not necessarily borne out of academic incompetency or malingering. All too often I hear my colleagues make disparaging remarks about the lack of effort students are putting into their work. Not all students are trying to get out of doing their work or making excuses for their failures. Many students struggle because they developed poor study habits, or in some cases, none at all. They come from high schools that did not encourage a good work ethic and they have been able to get by on their intellect up to a certain point, but more is required of them now and they don't know how to adjust. For some students their mental health issues, substance abuse, or personal problems weigh so heavily on them that it is impossible for them to succeed in college until they sort this out and receive professional help. But to attribute all or most student failure to character flaws or intentional academic neglect is to do a disservice to both them and you.

As you identify one factor, you find underneath several related factors that need to be addressed as well.

This phenomenon of "blaming the student" and assuming that they are simply not spending enough time on their schoolwork absolves advisors from the more challenging task of helping an advisee uncover the often numerous and compounded factors that lead to poor academic performance in college. I am not suggesting that all faculty do this intentionally, and sometimes it *is* the case that students are not spending enough time on their work outside of class, but using this as our default assumption is not a productive approach and has the potential to mask the real reasons for poor performance. Most of us who have spent time with struggling students know that getting to the bottom of a student's poor performance is similar to peeling away the layers of an onion. As you identify one factor, you find underneath several related factors that need to be addressed as well. It is a time-consuming and sticky process but a necessary one if you want to be effective in your role.

An additional lesson learned from J.W. is that you do not have to be a counseling psychologist to be an effective advisor. There may be times when the student's academic struggles are complicated by anxiety, or depression, or fear of failure, but all universities have professional staff that is trained to assist the student with these issues. Your job is to refer the student to those services as well as help the student understand how his "job" of learning at the university might be impacted by these other issues. The skill that *is* required, however, is active listening, and this is something that everyone can employ. If you can avoid making premature assumptions about the student, your most effective diagnostic tool is your ability to listen to what the student says and ask questions that get to the root of his academic struggles. Once you do this you can begin to develop an action plan that will help him address his challenges. The art of listening is the humane aspect of advising that many overworked faculty lack. Active listening requires time, patience, and the ability to restrain yourself from checking email or multi-tasking during your meeting. Sometimes all J.W. needed was for me to listen.

To become an effective advisor to J.W. I had to learn to not make assumptions about his motivation and ability to succeed. I had to resist the temptation to compare him to myself as a student and to hold him up to those high standards. I had to listen carefully and ask questions that allowed him to articulate his own struggles and the reasons behind them as well as offer intervention strategies based on what he told me. I suspect that J.W. will never know that I benefitted as much from my interactions with him as his with me. He graduated from Wittenberg two weeks ago.

Wittenberg Glossary:

WittCAM: The Wittenberg Center for Applied Management offers alternative coursework to upper-level students who are focused in management.

WittSem: Wittenberg Seminars are small, topical courses designed by individual instructors or teams of instructors based on their intellectual interests and training. Required of all first-year students, the WittSem serves as an introduction to the core matters of academic inquiry at Wittenberg.

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Next Issue

Fall 2012: "Assessment / Engagement / Impact: Results from Two Multi-Institution Collaborative Studies"

In 2005, the late Dr. Michael Nolan of Augustana College Rock Island served as principal investigator for a grant from the Teagle Foundation to test the claim that the participating colleges and small universities made a demonstrable and statistically significant impact on the intellectual and ethical development of their students. The grant, "Measuring Intellectual Development and Civic Engagement through Value-Added Assessment," brought together over four years faculty, administrators, and academic staff from six member campuses to assess and discuss key findings. In 2009, Provost Ken Bladh of Wittenberg University was awarded a second grant from the Teagle Foundation to continue some of the research begun in the first Teagle grant. This second project, "Structuring Faculty Work Explicitly Around Student Learning" (2009), focused the discussion on 'high-impact teaching practices' and how institutions can sustain and encourage their use given competing demands for faculty time and sometimes inconsistent reward structures for faculty work. The Fall 2012 issue of *Chalk* will be dedicated to the memory of Michael Nolan and will provide a forum for program participants from the institutions involved to share what they have learned on their own campuses from one another in the process of completing this grant-funded research.

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