

Going Back to School Proves Rewarding

By Don Sarvey

This strange business all began with a message on my answering machine from some guy named Dr. Mahar.

It turned out that a friend, Bern Sharfman, had recommended me to teach a course on magazine writing at Penn State Harrisburg. I don't know what Bern had against Bill Mahar. I've since found him to be a true gentleman and scholar.

Anyway, little did I realize what I was getting into when I returned Dr. Mahar's call and said I'd be willing to give it a whirl.

First off, Dr. Mahar's secretary, Loretta Reigle (a real peach), wanted a course description. I whipped up something that sounded jazzy and could fit anything I decided to do. What was so hard about this?

Next came the matter of a textbook. How to pick a textbook? I brought all my journalistic experience to bear. Eeny, meeny, miny, mo, with which do I go? Actually the book I picked was a good one. Of course, I never would have known about it if Mrs. Reigle hadn't forwarded the publisher's sample to me.

Now came the request for a syllabus. Hmmm. Had to look that one up. Doing a syllabus meant I actually had to think about what I wanted to accomplish in this course. At the time, I had no inkling how fast a semester could go by. Or how overly ambitious my 17-week scenario would turn out to be.

Finally, the first day of class rolled around. I was terrified. Immobile with fear. I knew my throat would close up. I would only be able to wheeze incoherently.

In fact, the first day was about as bad as I expected. All those young faces looking up, waiting for me to say something. Darn it, Bern, why did you get me into this? I stammered and rocked back and forth from one foot to another as I stood behind the lectern. I think I managed to introduce myself,

give an assignment and dismiss the class.

But, after a few more classes something happened. I started to relax a bit. Here I was talking about writing, one of my favorite subjects, and these young men and women were interested. They actually listened and they asked questions. We talked, we discussed. I had been afraid of not being able fill 50 minutes. Soon I found I was running out of time, not able to cover all I intended.

Not only was I starting to enjoy myself, I was starting to find out that I was learning as much as the students. Having earned a living at writing for nearly 20 years, I often operated on automatic pilot. In dissecting the writing process for the students, I began to examine more closely what I did and why I did it a certain way.

Another bonus was getting excited all over again about writing. The students' enthusiasm was contagious. A certain amount of weariness is bound to creep in if you do something long enough. Now I was getting the cobwebs knocked out.

And then there was the reward of seeing students do good work. I never knew how exciting that could be. To see them put to good use something you transmitted-- well, that was a bit of a rush, to be honest. And when some of them published stuff they had done for class, the 15 to 20 hours a week the class demanded didn't seem quite so bad.

That was my first semester. Last semester I taught journalistic writing to a class twice as large. I learned that class size makes an incredible difference. A large class takes much longer to transform itself into an organic whole. I thought it might never happen, but eventually it did.

I didn't know the students as well last semester, and the assignments were less ambitious because of the time it took to read and grade them. But I still learned, so that made me hopeful they were learning too.

After two semesters at Penn

State Harrisburg I have only good things to say about the students and the people who run the Humanities Division. Nearly all the students are good-natured, but serious about what they're trying to accomplish. Dr. Mahar and his people are supportive and helpful, but not rigid about the way things should be done.

I'm glad I came back to school.

Don Sarvey, a magazine editor and freelance writer, is a part-time instructor. He is a member of the Class of 1968.

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