

Controversial prof shuns student opinion

Maryann Harpin
Special to the Capital Times

Take a humanities course with Melvin Wolf, and you'll get a 16-week course in critical thinking skills--Wolfian style.

In his classes, Wolf bans his students from sharing their personal reactions to the works they study.

"No one is really interested in that

PROFILE

anyway," Wolf said. Instead, he requires students to formulate hypotheses and defend them with verifiable evidence from the "primary source"--the actual novel or painting, for example, rather than a critic's analysis or textbook writer's interpretation of it, or even the student's own opinion.

To a student who gives an idea without textual references, Wolf counters "Are you conjecturing? Where is that in the text?"

This strict focus on hypothesis testing and textual verification jolts some students.

"He's obstinate and highly opinionated," said one student of Wolf's. "He's entitled to be that way, but not at the expense of students."

Another humanities major confessed, "I didn't take him, because I heard that he doesn't give out As."

How does Wolf feel about his critics? He encourages students to apply critical thinking when considering him.

"How are they evaluating me?" Wolf asked. "Are they using valid data and valid criteria? Have they observed me, or are they just listening to their friends?"

Wolf recalled a mail carrier whose daughter disliked Wolf, but had never taken a class with him. Several years later, the same carrier reported that his daughter had married one of Wolf's former students who said Wolf was "a great teacher."

That, Wolf said, is the difference that first-hand experience and diligent effort in class can make.

"To do something well is hard," Wolf said.

He compared his classes to a sports team with a tough coach, who requires his players to show up for practice three times a week.

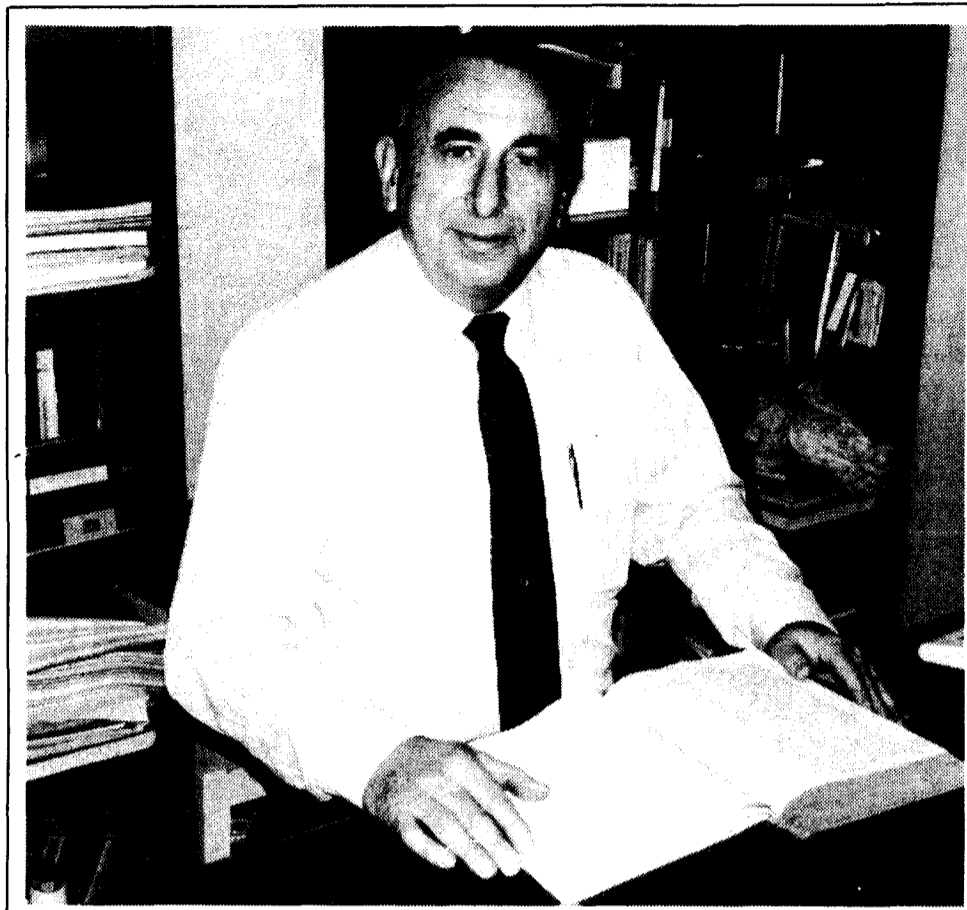
Wolf's "athletes" miss the ball occasionally, but after enduring a snide remark or two, step up to bat again.

Some students avoid Wolf's classes. At one time, this bothered him, but Wolf now says his classes are better without them.

But, this indifference is not directed at all students. Wolf is very interested in his students, leaning forward as he speaks of them, his smile stretching wide across his face. Wolf said he learns from his students each semester.

"One of the joys of studying at a university is that the junior scholars can help the senior scholars see things they've stopped seeing since they've been around the barn so many times," Wolf said.

Mark Weller, a senior majoring in secondary education English and former student of Wolf's, agreed.



Melvin Wolf

Photo by Karen Putt

"He's willing to change his opinion if a new or innovative idea is substantiated with empirical evidence," Weller said, adding that Wolf "knows where he's going" when he teaches. "He gives you something concrete."

Another education major said she hesitated to take a class with Wolf. She decided to sign up for spring semester, and is pleased with her decision.

"If I hadn't taken him, I really would have missed something special here," she said. "I really think his methodology does work. I've tried it in other classes, and it works well."

Teaching at a school that emphasizes the humanities and using his methods is ideal to Wolf. He earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Massachusetts, and his master's degree and doctorate in English and literature at the University of Michigan.

Although he taught at the University of Massachusetts for eight years, he longed for a position that allowed interdisciplinary teaching.

He was attracted to Penn State Harrisburg when he heard that an upper division campus near Harrisburg was opening, and that interdisciplinary study was a requirement for faculty.

"In the real world, we don't divide things up into disciplines," Wolf said. "We hear, and feel, and see and read all at the same time."

This semester, Wolf is teaching his analytical thinking processes not only in humanities and literature courses, but in a class he helped design, applied ethics.

In the class, students are given a formula method for resolving ethical dilemmas. The course has received high

marks from employers of former students, who apply their learning to real-life scenarios.

This interdisciplinary approach applies to Wolf's life, as well. Wolf compares his

life to a "stream with concurrently flowing currents, each of which deserves attention."

For example, Wolf said if he had 10 extra hours a week, he'd split his time proportionately between his profession, family and hobbies--sailing and bicycling.

"I try to make my life as close to a good work of art as possible," Wolf said, adding that the individual elements must be skillfully combined to achieve the desired results.

Working at his office computer, Wolf straddles a "back chair"--a chair with a small, padded bench seat and wraparound leg rest which forces the user to sit correctly.

Bookshelves, filled completely, cover two walls, almost reaching the ceiling. Within arm's reach of his desk, Wolf has assembled a small beverage center, with a one-cup coffee maker.

Resting on the bookshelf across the room, but in his line of vision, is a photo of Wolf; his wife, Joan; his three children and daughter-in-law, taken before a week-long sailing trip on the Chesapeake. They are wearing matching red polo shirts so they would be recognized as members of the same crew.

Whether he's sailing a 41-foot ketch with his family, or struggling along with a class of Wolfian thinkers, Wolf practices his methodology in every facet of his life.

"You have to evaluate your life in regard to all your functions, not just one of them," Wolf said. "Whatever my hand findeth to do, I want to do it as well as I can."

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