A few days ago, I asked my Facebook friends what advice they would give to college professors: “Something you wish they didn’t do. Something you wish they did more of. Anything, really.” I got a number of good responses, which I will now share.

A former graduate student who now directs a writing center at a small liberal arts college suggested “work with writing center staffers to help you design assignments and assessments.” He also wrote, “rethink product and think process; consider genre theory in all that you assign; think how the assignments in a course work in terms of scaffolding.” Finally, this good advice: “slow down.”

A former student who is about to graduate offers this advice: “This mainly applies in the College of Business management courses, but I would like to see more role playing. Give the students a scenario and have them see different ways to handle the situation. It gives them a chance to be put on the spot and learn proper techniques to critically think about their reactions.”

A former English undergraduate and MA student who is now an English professor herself says, “More practice equals more polish. The more you have students write in low-stakes assignments, the better their polished writing will be. Good grammar does not equal good writing/thinking, and ‘poor’ grammar doesn’t equal poor writing/thinking. You cannot undo or redo a decade’s worth of habits and ways of thinking in a 13-week semester.”

Many of my Facebook friends are mandolin players, many of whom I only know online. My mandolin friend in Chicago writes the following: “This would apply more to the sciences, I think. All year long, the pros would teach us what they already knew. I always felt they should add a few sessions where they would tell us more about areas still unknown: what are the challenges? where is the new research heading? what new opportunities will await us in a few short years? Just my $0.02.” A good two cents, Michael!

Another mandolin friend offers three bits of advice: 1) Never accept the status quo as optimal— it never is. 2) Always question and challenge established “rules” of thought. They may be good rules, but you won’t know if you don’t challenge them. 3) No good can come from the use of a logic-based argument when in a dialogue with a value-based thinker. For example, a biology teacher vs. a home-schooled creationist or FBI negotiators vs. Branch Davidians.

Yet another mandolin friend, Mike from Canada, has this strict advice: “Make them read and write, a lot, and flunk them out for bad grammar and bad spelling.”
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A colleague from my PhD days at the University of Rochester who went on to become a great high school teacher and then a great vice principal and principal, gives us this good reminder: “Since you ask, stop blaming it on the high schools. Then we can stop blaming it on the middle schools...”

Yet another mandolin friend, who is also a retired high school teacher, reaches back to his own college days: “Read your own assignments. One day my Freshman English teacher, a newbie from Yale or someplace, grew rapturous over a little four-line Frost poem. Just couldn't stop floating on air. I hadn't read the assignment, either, and was glancing over to the following page. There was the REST of the POEM! Four more great lines! And naturally, there was nobody but me to bring it to his attention.”

A friend of mine from the Mark Twain world offers this: “Review the syllabus at the beginning of the year, and connect the assignments to the classroom activities, so that students develop a sense of how the details they are learning fit into the framework of the semester.”

A former English MA student is now a teacher and department head at a South Carolina tech school. She writes, “Be FLAWsome! In other words, be willing to be imperfect, admit mistakes, and model lifelong learning. (I once advised one of my instructors to take trip in front of the class and laugh at herself because her students hated her--totally worked.)”

A high school friend writes, “When a new edition of the textbook comes out, update your tests to coincide with the new content. I had a psych prof who didn’t. Also, be creative and engaging. Otherwise it is like listening to Charlie Brown’s teacher.”

A person I never taught offers this: “I feel strongly that part of the problem with higher ed is that very few professors are actually trained to be teachers. Apart from a Master’s or PhD in their field, they have no pedagogical training and really don’t know the first thing about how to convey the knowledge that they have spent years amassing. Before I went back to do my PhD, I got certified to teach high school French and worked for many years with K-12 students. That experience was incredibly enriching, and I can say without hesitation that it totally changed the way I look at pedagogy and education in general. So my advice for college professors would be to take the science of pedagogy seriously. You wouldn’t go to a doctor who didn’t go to medical school, and you wouldn’t hire a lawyer who didn’t go to law school, so why are our students paying so much money to get taught by people who have little to no educational background in pedagogy? That is the question that needs to be asked.”

One of my wife’s cousins teaches elementary school: “As a science major, hands-on science makes learning more tangible! With new technology and media, teaching can done to promote more intrigue to delve deeper into a subject matter. I would’ve loved it too if professors smiled and engaged more with their students.

College students are in college because they want to be--no need to be the distant, scowling teacher to establish disciplined classroom management. Leave that to elementary teachers like me!”

Hey, who says Facebook is a waste of time?
XXITE 2.0 —— The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and technology. You’ll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at http://wuxxite.ning.com/ Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu

The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor’s request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don’t want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology, and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service. People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don’t have the time or they can’t at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop See you there!

Thought For the Week

“Be respectful to your superiors, if you have any.”
--Mark Twain, Advice to Young People speech, 15 April 1882