Warnings From the Trenches—But I Thought We Were in the Trenches!

Last week, I wrote about a quotation I had seen on Facebook. This week, Facebook once again provides the prompt for my weekly screed. Who said Facebook was only good for pictures of cute cats?

Several academic friends, including colleagues at Winthrop, posted a link to a Washington Post article, “A Warning to College Pros From a High School Teacher,” by Kenneth Bernstein. Bernstein’s article first appeared in Academe, a publication of AAUP. Here is the link to his article, “Warnings From the Trenches”: http://www.aaup.org/article/warnings-trenches. I believe it was Marshall Jones who posted on Facebook, “I think we need to have a conversation about this.” So Marshall, here is my part of the conversation.

Bernstein recently retired as a teacher of government, and his warning focuses on what he sees as the effects of No Child Left Behind, enacted in 2002-2003. As he notes, we at the college level are now seeing students who have been educated under the policy almost exclusively.

He reports the following about the bright 10th-grade students he encountered: “In many cases, students would arrive in our high school without having had meaningful social studies instruction, because even in states that tested social studies or science, the tests did not count for ‘adequate yearly progress’ under No Child Left Behind. With test scores serving as the primary if not the sole measure of student performance and, increasingly, teacher evaluation, anything not being tested was given short shrift.”

Most tests, he says, are multiple-choice tests, which cause writing and higher-order thinking to suffer. The bulk of Bernstein’s teaching was in AP Government, and even though part of the AP exam is written, he sees the rubric focused more on content and less on logic, argument, and clear expression. He also reports that he had 129 AP students, as well as 46 other students, making the assignment of meaningful writing extremely difficult.

Here are the overall results Bernstein sees: “The structure of testing has led to students arriving at our school without what previously would have been considered requisite background knowledge in social studies, but the problem is not limited to this field. Students often do not get exposure to art or music or other nontested subjects. In high-need schools, resources not directly related to testing are eliminated: at the time of the teachers’ strike last fall, 160 Chicago public schools had no libraries. Class sizes exceeded forty students—in elementary school.”

Bernstein’s plea to us is simple and stark: “Don’t blame us,” he says, meaning don’t blame public school teachers for
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the inadequacies he tells us we will see in our students.

I must admit my own guilt in this blame game. Just yesterday I was telling my CRTW students that the persistent problems nearly all of them have with comma usage is because, I suspect, they were taught to "use a comma when you feel a pause," rather than taught the rules for the use of commas. I think I am correct in my assumption, but Bernstein makes me want to soften and back off my finger-pointing.

I posted a link to Bernstein’s article for my CRTW students, figuring that this would be a good piece of writing to use their critical thinking skills on. Here is what Brittany wrote in her weekly blog:

"After reading the article that Dr. Bird posted, 'Warning to College Profs From a High School Teacher' and reading Chapter 3 in Learning To Think Things Through, I began really thinking about my high school experience. I can remember now how in all of my AP classes, we weren't really taught in terms of gaining knowledge that we could use in the future, but rather we were taught what would appear on the AP exam at the end of the semester, and that was that. So we weren't really getting beneath the surface of the subjects we were learning, we were instead looking at the broad picture, learning just exactly what we needed to know to get a good grade on that exam to get college credit. The end result? I don't remember half of what I was taught in AP Macroeconomics, and all I can recall from AP Biology are the times that my teacher ripped my molecule diagrams apart in the lab when I messed up on one part. My teacher would have us memorize definitions because that is what would be on the test in matching or multiple choice form. They wouldn't spend much time really explaining what those definitions meant, so I spent hours memorizing all these words that I can't remember to this day, but I passed the test at the time. All in all, I graduated from high school ranking 5th in my class, but that doesn't mean that much now that I'm in college and I'm having to relearn a lot of the stuff that wasn't retained from high school."

Brittany’s experience in high school sounds exactly like what Bernstein writes about. But here is what Brittany wrote about her experience at Winthrop:

"The way I was taught to learn in high school is really beginning to hurt me now that I'm in college. I was never taught to think, read, or write critically in high school because it wasn't really necessary. But now, it is being required of me in almost all of my classes, and I'm really struggling with it. I now have to question why certain chemical reactions happen in my chemistry lab, I have to read very critically in my sociology class so that I will gain knowledge from the book that isn't gained from my professor's lecture, and I have to write about my reasons for thinking certain ways in this class, something that I haven't ever had to do before. But in order to succeed in college, I now realize that I'm going to have to work harder with my critical reading, thinking, and writing so that I can gain the most knowledge from my classes that I can and be able to carry that knowledge out into my life after college."

What both write is sobering and challenging, but I am invigorated by what Brittany writes about her classes at Winthrop. She knows she has to work harder, and so do I!
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

“The happy phrasing of a compliment is one of the rarest of human gifts, and the happy delivery of it another.”
—Mark Twain