Non, Post, Vet—All Welcome Here!

When I walked into the classroom for the first day of class last semester, April was sitting on the front row, in the exact center. No other students sat in her row. My first clue that she was not like the other students.

The second clue came when I was calling the roll and said her last name. She said, “It means lettuce in Norwegian.” (Or some other language—I can’t remember, but I remember “lettuce.”)

The third clue came as she asked thoughtful questions about the syllabus. Another way she was not like the other students.

April is what used to be called a non-traditional student. The preferred term now seems to be post-traditional student. (More on that later, from April, who dislikes the term.) I don’t know her whole life story, but I do know that she started college as a “traditional student,” a number of years ago, but did not finish. She came back a few years ago, and she is now a senior business administration major. She is determined to graduate from Winthrop at the same time her son graduates from high school.

April was in my CRTW Honors section. She told me early on that she was worried about taking it as an honors course, but, as I am sure you already guessed, her worries were groundless. She is smart, she worked very hard, and she did well in the class.

A few years ago, Robert was another student taking CRTW as an honors course, and like April, a bit worried that he was in the wrong class. But he was also smart and hard-working, and Robert did well too. On first glance, Robert did not seem different from his classmates. But he was. Robert had just returned from active duty in Iraq. He was the first veteran of the recent wars that I encountered in my classes, but he surely will not be the last.

I feel a personal connection to both April and Robert, because of my parents. My mother, Pat Bird, was a very intelligent and talented woman, second in her high school class, and certainly someone who should have gone to college. She desperately wanted to, but money was very tight for her and my grandparents in 1948. She became a secretary instead; like so many women of her generation, she was under-employed in one of the few careers open to her. How she would have loved to have come to college a bit later, as April is now doing. But four kids closed that door. I remember the few times she took courses at community college. How hard she worked at those courses, and how well she did! She would have been a joy to have as a student in class, as almost all adult learners are.

I have had such students in composition and literature classes, and even though they endure the stares and suspicion.
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of their younger counterparts, they soon show themselves to be the leaders and stars of the classroom. On several occasions, I have had an adult learner in a class who totally changed the atmosphere of the class and the attitudes of the other students, all for the good. Oh to have a handful of them!

Robert’s situation as a veteran returning to the classroom made me think of my father, Jake Bird. He turned 17 in February 1944, and he was so worried that World War II would end before he got in that he talked my grandparents into signing and letting him enlist in the Navy at that young age. He was a junior in high school at the time, so he came back from the Pacific a few years later and did his time to graduate. The next step in the plan involved using the GI Bill to go to college. That plan went awry when he met a pretty, young secretary named Pat. Any hope of that dream of college was dashed by the arrival of a little baby boy named Johnny.

What must it be like for recent veterans like Robert to come to college, or back to college, after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan? I can only imagine. This year’s freshmen students (traditional students, so-called) were in kindergarten or first grade on September 11, 2001. Hundreds of thousands of young people have since gone off to war, while most of our students led conventional lives. And now those veterans are coming to college, in droves, in numbers unlike any since World War II and Vietnam. Winthrop is doing a good job of providing support services for veterans, but faculty and staff probably need to be more aware of their special needs. Thus I advertise Katie Sardelli’s TLC session on October 8, “Boots to Books: Working With Students Veterans in the Classroom and on Campus.” The last time I checked, 11 staff members had registered, but only one faculty. We need more.

Students like April have an organization, too: Non-traditional Adult Student Learners, or NASA. And this year, April is the president. That comes as no surprise to me. She is in talks and correspondence with President Comstock about the future for her cohort of learners, and although I doubt she will persuade the president that we should not use the currently trendy term “post-traditional students,”

I have no doubt that she will be very persuasive on other matters. I can only begin to imagine the many life tasks April and other students like her must juggle: kids and soccer practice and dentist appointments and supper on the table every night. But I have no doubt that April pulls all this off as well as she does her course work.

The demographics of our students are changing. We will be seeing more students like April and Robert—and that is a very good thing! We have in place support systems and organizations, and those will no doubt continue to evolve. I am merely making a plea to faculty and staff to notice April and Robert and their brothers and sisters, to nurture their special abilities and talents, to mentor them as they take yet another road down life’s highway, after having already taken very interesting roads before now.”
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. 

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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

"Why should society feel responsible only for the education of children, and not for the education of all adults of every age?"

--Erich Fromm

An ongoing publication of Winthrop University’s Teaching and Learning Center. Past issues are now archived on our webpage: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/mainresources.html