University Problems—Trying to Look on the Bright Side

Last night, my ENGL 600 class met for the second time. The official course name is “Materials and Methods of Research in English.” This is not the most sexy course title in the English Department curriculum! But it is a required course for the English MA, and English MAT students also take it, so the course is well-populated each fall.

Almost everyone who has gone to graduate school, in any discipline, has taken an analogous course: the introduction to research. I lived through two versions of the course, as an MA and PhD student, both of which had their merits, although both contained more pointless literary scavenger hunts than I thought were necessary. We try to make our course more practical: an introduction to advanced research methods, to critical theory, and to the profession of English. One of the textbooks we are using calls the course “graduate English boot camp.” I like that—I get to be the drill sergeant! Hey you, tuck in those pajamas!

That book, Graduate Study for the 21st Century, by Gregory Colón Semenza, is a book I wish had been available thirty years ago when I was a grad student, and a book I wish I had written. Rather than the stuffy book generations of English grad students have suffered through (I mention the name “Altick” only to enjoy watching my colleagues in Bancroft cringe), Semenza’s book offers practical, realistic, and frank advice about the profession and the career.

But after reading the first few chapters, my students came to class saying the book was “depressing” and “eye-opening.” The relatively bleak picture Semenza paints—the decline of tenure-track jobs, threats to tenure in general, the growing reliance on adjunct faculty—is all too true, but painful for students who are just embarking on their careers. Those who receive MA’s here will find PhD programs harder to get into, and if they make the MA a terminal degree, they may well be one of those exploited adjuncts. It’s depressing enough to make them want to quit before they really get started.

I googled the words “university problems.” First up were Twitter and Tumblr accounts with that title, pretty funny stuff that students post about their problems—more or less a variation on “first world problems,” with an emphasis on hangovers. But I also found a variety of serious articles, including one on The Huffington Post by Ethan Miller, identified as “student activist, American University,” entitled “The Crisis in Higher Education” (rather than provide a link, which gets cumbersome in this format, I will let you go to the Google yourself).

Here is his opening paragraph:

“Higher education is in very serious trouble. And.
Continued from page 1

its problems are not something that can be solved quickly, or without serious changes to the way that the system works. Higher education, which for years has been trusted to educate the country's young people, has reached the climax of a decades-long transformation from a system of intellectual exploration and learning, where degrees were measurements of achievement and creative thought was valued and fostered to a system modeled after corporations, fraught with grade inflation and worthless degrees, focused on career paths and earning as much money as possible.

Miller goes on to note a number of problems: in the past ten years, tuition and fees have increased 66% at public four-year institutions; student debt has passed a trillion dollars, and the average student now incurs personal debt of $26,600; full-time administrators have increased greatly, while full-time faculty are up only slightly. Nationwide, full-time faculty are increasingly being replaced with part-time faculty and adjuncts. Part-time and term-limited faculty now make up 70% of faculty ranks, while 45 years ago, 78% of faculty were in the tenure track.

Here is Miller’s conclusion:

“Does this sound like a system that is working properly? On one side, student tuition is being raised as much as 5 percent a year, restricting access to higher education to only the most privileged students. On the other side, professors are being paid poverty wages, severely impacting the quality of the education they are able to provide, and working in academia is looking less and less like a viable career path for most students, limiting the expansion of knowledge. Without taking serious steps to resolve these problems, the crisis in higher education is going to continue to grow. This crisis is not only endangering the futures of those working in academia, but the futures of all students, as well as the health of our country’s democracy and economy.”

Those words ring loudly for me as I think about my students in ENGL 600. What are we preparing them for? Will there even be universities when they are ready to step into the jobs we now hold? (Miller doesn’t even mention online courses and MOOCs.)

Then I remember myself sitting in their chairs, over thirty years ago now. In 1981, the future for higher education looked just as bleak. We faced shrinking job opportunities, and many of my fellow graduate students dropped out and went into other fields: real estate, secondary education, law school. One of my friends who graduated with me did not get a tenure track job until about six years ago; Joe drifted from one part-time job to another, until he finally found that job he was expecting all along.

But the rest of us who made it through the cauldron of PhD studies got jobs, in various universities and colleges, and now we are relatively close to retirement. Perhaps the future always looks bleak.

But these trends and statistics are surely sobering, daunting not only for my young students, but for all of us. We at Winthrop, of course, cannot solve these problems on our own. But we do have a piece of the puzzle, and we need to be part of the solution. Depressing, yes, and eye-opening, for sure. But also exciting and invigorating. Isn’t it good to be on the front lines of an important battle?
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/

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

“Do not anticipate trouble, or worry about what may never happen. Keep in the sunlight.”—Benjamin Franklin