

Learning from Undergraduates

by

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Occasionally, teaching undergraduates involves moments which provoke you to curse. On the other hand, learning from undergraduates can be a blessing which demands your gratitude. The young women and men who sat in my classrooms from 1970 to 2012 were powerful instructors. They were unpredictable. Some of them were brilliant, challenging me to challenge them. The so-called average students inspired me to invent puzzling questions for which we struggled together to find responses, for the questions defied our best efforts to find answers. The slower students used their lack of preparation to teach me why compassion and patience must be used with caution, why sympathy must not be confused with empathy. In one way or another, all of my students contributed to my worldly salvation. None of them are to be blamed for my spiritual flaws, for the faults that require me to negotiate and renegotiate endlessly with the cosmic powers. For a period of forty-two years, undergraduates taught me the limits of being human.

They also taught me why the quest for clarity can be dreadful. Clarity in speech and writing that is (or can be) free in day to day life is costly inside the boundaries of institutionalized learning. As teachers try to build knowledge and share insights about what they are constructing, profound investments in a discipline can encourage blindness. Some of us who deal with literary theory, critical possibilities, and interpretation, for example, often mistake our errors for "truth." We can easily forget what now appears to us to be simple was at some point in our life histories daunting and complex. Our acquired expertise in language and literature and writing can be diabolic. Our praxis or pedagogy can be identical with the Devil's work, particularly in instances when we believe we have to be a god in the eyes of our students and our peers. Abandoning common sense, many of us clothe ignorance in awkward prose and parade it as evidence of superior achievement. Is it ironic that obstreperous representation of thought earns great praise?

Retired, liberated from the immediate need to learn from undergraduates or to teach them, I have not forgot what they taught me. The quest for clarity is still a dreadful journey toward eternity, and I thank undergraduates for implanting such knowledge in my mind.

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2001 and received the Richard Wright Literary Excellence Award from the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration in 2011 (the photo to the left is of Jerry Ward, Jr., at the Eudora Welty Symposium in Columbus, Mississippi in 1998 taken by Nancy Jacobs).