

Michael C. T. Brookes

A DEAN'S DILEMMAS

*No wonder of it; Sheer plod makes
plough down sillion/Shine*

Hopkins, The Windhover

We all know that Wolfe was not far wrong when he told us we can't go home again, but the temptation to try is often irresistible. I left my full-time position in English nine years ago and had not taught a writing course for some time but, after nearly two years as Dean of Academic Affairs at a large community college in The City University of New York, I very much wanted to teach a writing class again. Not out of nostalgia. My motivation was more complex than that.

I have great respect for the art of teaching and for those who practice that art with care and skill. As Academic Dean I wanted to show my respect by taking a class and doing a little of what faculty do a great deal of. I also believe in principle that academic administrators, especially those in community colleges, should teach regularly so that they do not lose sight of the primary purpose for the existence of their institutions and also to make them aware of what faculty really face. Moreover, teaching a course is the very best way to get a sense of the workings of a college.

It had been many years since one of our college's three deans

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had taught a course on campus and my decision quickly became common knowledge. I chose a noncredit basic skills writing course for my New York teaching debut because I saw it as presenting a stimulating challenge, and because CUNY has made a special commitment to basic skills and many faculty are involved in teaching basic skills courses. I wanted a ground-floor look at the kind of work they do and direct contact with the students for and with whom they do it.

Despite twenty years' teaching experience, I felt as nervous as a brand-new faculty member about tackling my first basic writing course, but I believed that the many other composition courses I had taught in the past would stand me in good stead. Besides, I had the comforting reassurance of top-notch resource people on and off campus; faculty members who had been involved in the teaching of basic composition for many years and who had a national reputation for their work and writing. They knew the challenges and pitfalls and had promised their help; they would not, I knew, let me down.

The spring semester was to begin in early February with my class scheduled to meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8:00 to 9:40 A.M. In December, I got copies of the texts most commonly used for the course, and by late January, after several anxious consultations with colleagues, I knew the objectives of the course, had a plan of action for the semester, and was equipped with a pocketful of tips, hints, and strategies. I remained nervous.

At one point the class had a paper enrollment of 27, but there were never more than 22 students really taking the course as two were transferred to other courses and three did no more than drop in two or three times during the first few weeks. We were, the 23 of us, a splendidly heterogeneous group. Most were 18-22 years old, but several were a good deal older. We included Hispanics, Black-Americans, and Italian-Americans as well as one Armenian, one Haitian, one Jamaican, and one expatriate Englishman. Such heterogeneity is now the rule rather than the exception in basic skills classes in CUNY's community colleges as the University's open admissions policy gives increasing numbers of minority and older students their first real chance to further their education. No fewer than nine students were repeating the course. This concerned me both as an administrator and as a teacher since no student wants or likes to have to repeat a basic skills course and the odds against student success, as the report of the 1984 CUNY Task Force on Student Retention and Academic Performance confirms, are in direct proportion to the number of times they attempt basic skills courses.

Practically every student, including the repeaters, expressed an earnest desire to pass the course. Many travelled for more than an hour to get to the campus, but they got there by and large on time for our twice-weekly 8 A.M. class. Yet sometimes it was a struggle to get the (to me) simplest things accomplished. In mid-March, almost halfway through the semester, I noted in my journal:

Everything's a struggle. At the first class I gave out a poop sheet explaining the course requirements, including what to bring to each class. For weeks not a class went by without someone saying, "I didn't know we had to bring that to every class." "I haven't got mine," or, "Do we have to bring this to the next class?" One student protested that the basic text was very heavy: too heavy to bring in twice a week!

Getting students to work together effectively in small groups also proved more difficult than I had anticipated. There were several needs and realities which had to be juggled and balanced: The one or two habitual nonworkers had to be kept apart as did those who actively disliked small group work and those who couldn't resist the temptation to socialize. It was also important to make sure that no group had only weaker students. It took me nearly half the semester to come up with groupings which took most of these variables into account but absences and lateness ensured that my formula was never fully tested. In any event some worthwhile work did get done in small groups from time to time, though they never became as powerful a learning mode as I had hoped they would. I find myself wondering whether collaborative learning is still too conventional a pedagogical technique for a class of predominantly nontraditional students. Or could it be just the reverse: are nontraditional students very traditional in looking to their teacher as the one source of learning and information? I am reasonably sure that the limited success of small-group work wasn't simply a matter of my not getting the right "mix." A research study on this subject would be useful.

Similarly, I saw the availability of a writing lab as a big plus. But some students I assigned to go there for tutorial help were upset and offended, reacting as though I had found them wanting and was punishing them.

No doubt many of these student behaviors had to do with that ambivalence about learning which is characteristic of many non-traditional students. But reading about that ambivalence had not prepared me sufficiently to deal with students experiencing it and expressing it through their behavior patterns. Handling these

behaviors was one of the first of my dilemmas. I did not always do well, sometimes reacting with annoyance or impatience when forbearance was called for. My journal records one such instance:

During the class someone got my dander up and we had a spat because I refused to accept a homework assignment he tried to complete in class.

— Will I get a zero? Does that mean you will give me a zero?

— Yes.

— Damn! That is really unfair.

It was worse than unfair. I knew that I should never have squabbled with the student in class. What's more, I knew that "getting a zero" for one assignment would not jeopardize any student's chances of passing the course. But the student didn't know this and I didn't tell him until we had a more productive exchange a little later. By the way, he was one of those who did pass the course.

On one very traditional point I was not prepared to negotiate: attendance. I made it quite clear early in the semester that here there would be no compromise: they *had* to be in class. If they had more than two unexcused absences, I would drop them. The point was reinforced by my calling the roll at the start of each class. They knew that I knew who was there and who was on time. By term's end, no student had been absent less than twice, but few had exceeded that number. On punctuality we compromised. I always got to class about five minutes early, and started right on time, but I stopped glowering at latecomers or commenting on their tardiness. My rationalization was that in most cases they couldn't control their travel time to within 5–10 minutes. For our 8 A.M. class, most left their houses between 6:30 and 7:00 A.M. Although one student lived only a ten-minute drive from campus, she left home at 7:00 because she had to get in line for a place in the college's pay-parking lot. She was frequently late.

After the initial classes, another dilemma made itself felt. My nervousness gave way to something approaching panic as I became aware of just how great the students' needs were. I felt inadequately prepared to offer the range and depth of help they needed. My journal returns time and again to this point.

March 20

On class days I frequently wake up at 3:00 or 4:00 A.M. feeling great anxiety about the course, considerable doubt about my adequacy to teach it, and a sense of almost overwhelming responsibility. Tuesday when I woke up I thought

I'd beaten the early-waking bugaboo. Then found, after I got up, that it was 4:45, not 5:45. Spent a long time (45 minutes) on the uses of the final *s*. I have no language to talk to the students about grammar. To say "possessive pronoun" or "third person singular" is to speak nonsense words to them. I wrote "to be" on the board and asked the class to give me the present tense. Silence. Fear. Anxiety. They know, of course, but they don't know they know. And when it was all over, the "s" as plural, as possessive, as third person singular, how many had really grasped it? How many will retain it next week?

Note: The inappropriateness of my demand that these students conjugate so irregular a verb struck me later. In retrospect I am embarrassed.

March 22

One student was terrified that I would "take off points" because he hadn't indented the paragraphs in the essay I collected. He waited for me in the corridor after class to ask that I give him the essay so he could correct it. His anxiety was palpable. During the class when I asked this same student to show me the verb in the sentence "The white shark can hear for miles," he pointed to "shark." I groan and wonder how I can help him.

March 29

Jayne (my wife) suggests that the students and I have more in common than is apparent. Like them, I have many anxieties about the course. Like them, I struggle to make each class, each assignment at least acceptable and would like each to be a success. I fret over my shortcomings; I have trouble sleeping on nights before class; I am oppressed by my growing awareness of the depth of the students' needs and the modest resources I can make available to them. The students, of course, have no sense of me as a fellow-struggler. To them I am the answer man: without fear of failure, and with immense power over them. And even though I think I understand something of what they are going through, I really have no more knowledge of the specifics of their struggles than they have of mine. Like two blind mice, we blunder about in a roughly defined terrain. With a lot of luck we may bump into one another and with even more luck the contact will prove helpful to the student. But in many cases that will not happen—look at all the students who have

already given up—and in other cases the contact will not be helpful.

As I look back, it seems to me that this dilemma of mine contained two separate strands. One clear, factual strand is that indeed I did not, objectively, have all the skills, knowledge, or resources the students needed. To take just one example: Three students in the class needed an instructor with some background in ESL and I have no such background. Other students had needs at a level at which I do not know how to function. For instance, I only know a few ways to explain the use of the apostrophe to show possession. Once I've run through those, I have no further resources to bring to a student's aid. Naturally, I tried to learn on the job.

I was twice blessed in my struggles. The secretaries in my office gave me extraordinary and top-notch support, typing and reproducing all manner of materials in remarkably little time. The course would have been a shambles without that dependable assistance. I wish I could believe that all faculty teaching basic skills could count on comparable secretarial support. And the steady stream of counsel and guidance from my two faculty "consultants" was of immeasurable value. At one point in the semester I stumbled upon an article about sentence combining. That may not be exactly a straw, but I felt that I was drowning and clutched it to me. At last, I thought, an approach which will really help me to help the students! As I was new to this technique I turned to one of my resources for advice. He spent about an hour with me, gave me a large folder of sentence-combining exercises and other materials he had gathered and prepared over the years, and then carefully explained why he no longer used this approach. He helped me understand that no technique is a panacea and that there is no quick fix in teaching basic composition. Even had I understood the technique completely it would have been disastrous to change direction so radically part way through the term. The straw was just a straw, not a lifeboat, and I let go of it and kept going.

The second strand in my sense of inadequacy was more subjective. Despite all my efforts some students were simply abandoning ship:

April 3

I took out the blue books students used during our first class two months ago. Of the initial group 6 have disappeared; 4 of the 6 withdrew unofficially (which means they disappeared) from the same course last semester.

April 10

When I came into the office this morning a withdrawal form was on my desk. I signed it but was sad. The student's choice was prudent in that her chances of passing weren't very good, but I am sorry she apparently did not feel it worth her while to continue attending. I feel, in fact, that I failed her.

Others, despite their and my best efforts, were making no discernible progress. At times my journal reflects frustration, anger, and even hostility towards the class.

April 26

I left class today feeling totally discouraged. This is certainly the hardest, least rewarding teaching I have ever done. No wonder faculty become stuck and insulated; no wonder they burn out. How can one survive full-time teaching, year after year, with students so devoid of either skills or discipline? Some have such massive insecurity that they want every sentence they grind out approved by me. Some are so much caught up in their own world that I can see no connection between what I have said—or rather assigned—and what they are doing. What are these people doing here? Or am I the misfit, the one who doesn't belong in that classroom? And so many are not willing to commit any time to the work. They are not willing to come and see me outside class; some even write their assignments in class. It's hopeless.

May 7

Continued to grade the students' latest essays. They are predictable; none have outdone themselves. For the first time this semester I did not return papers at the class following the one when I collected them. And I'm really having trouble ploughing through them so that they will be ready for tomorrow's class. Is it just end-of-year doldrums? Am I tired or bored? How must the students be feeling?

Sheer plod makes plough down
sillion/Shine

Not always.

Mercifully, my emotional state was not one of unrelieved gloom. There were wonderful bonuses, like the first set of student journals. Even those which were not well done gave evidence of a willingness to try.

March 13

Fourteen students handed in journals. Several are little more than diaries. "At 6:00 A.M. I got up, left the house at 6:40 A.M. Only one class today." That sort of thing. But others were less inhibited, talking about their hopes and fears, boy-friends and girlfriends and about a range of quite unexpected things. In one case there was a startling glimpse into the student's life at home: "After work at 6:30, I go home and try to relax but in my house it's impossible. The only time you relax is when you sleep." An entry on Poe by a student who announced that he is a high school dropout ends: "I think he is the best spook author there was. Better than Hitchcock and all the others." A small number of entries caught me by their beauty.

Artists always interested me. I don't know why, maybe because it's beautiful to see someone draw. See the beginning and the ending.

and

The summer is like living somewhere else.

One student was touchingly conscientious, writing for exactly the prescribed 30 minutes each week and dating each entry. Another handed in a single page. A third is troubled by advances from her new young boss. A fourth explodes into a sudden rash of anger at what he experienced as an example of racial discrimination against him. In each case I found a comment or suggestion to make and, usually, a sentence to highlight as being in some (undefined) way "special." Overall, I am pleased and think requiring the journal was a good move.

The classes in which we got a piece of work accomplished were also a big "up" for me.

March 27

Today's class seemed good. I told the students that they had to finish their essay on "School Safety" during the period and hand it in. Then I put them in pairs with a handout of questions to ask about each paragraph and they were off. Whenever there was an unwarranted increase in noise, I squashed it firmly. When one student made to leave early, I pointed out a glaring weakness in his work and told him to go back and correct it. RESULT: The entire group (16 were present) worked steadily for the entire 100 minutes. Meanwhile, I had conferences and returned papers. The confer-

ences too went well. I believe I was able to be both supportive and very frank about shortcomings.

March 29

After a most restless night during which I reorganized my next two classes, I met the 5 students who made it through an awful snow/sleet/rain storm to be in class at 8:00 (5 more trickled in over the next 40 minutes). I was touched and impressed by their dedication—no, their earnestness—and tried, on the spur of the moment to come up with a third agenda for the period. I hope they felt their effortful journey was not unrewarded.

It occurs to me, and in my experience this is not typical at all, that it was the weaker students who showed up today. Only one of the stronger students was there, two of the weakest, and the others are borderline, i.e. they might make it but it will be close.

May 3

Once again, there is a relaxed atmosphere in class. We are beginning to get along together and to be aware of what each person's limits are. Perhaps I could have been less fierce, less inaccessible earlier, but I was too scared—afraid of doing a poor job and letting the students down.

When the end of the semester and the final exam rushed in on us, I think we were all a little surprised and would have liked just one more week. A sentimental wish since one or two more classes could have made no substantial difference to any student's chances of success.

Grading the finals presented me with one last dilemma.

May 17-20

There were no unexpected miracles or breakthroughs in the final papers. The two students who outdid themselves on the practice final dropped back to their customary level and one of the two who had underperformed pulled himself up nicely. For all our sakes I wanted as many students as possible to pass. There were several whom I couldn't decide on. A second reader saw one as an easy pass and this suggested that I might have been grading too hard. So I went over three other borderline cases once more. In two cases I decided to give the students a shot at the next course and passed them, but I could not do that for the third though I would have dearly liked to.

What were the results of that sixteen weeks of work? As my journal shows, I learned a great deal, as I had expected. Some information about the course comes from the eleven students who completed faculty evaluation forms. Two were strongly dissatisfied with my performance, but to my great relief the others were very positive. One wrote "I like him, he's cool" and I was absurdly pleased. Several commented that I was courteous and one called me caring. Almost all said that classes were worthwhile.

Another way of assessing the results is by seeing what happened to the students.

- 27 students were on the class roster at some point
- 2 transferred to other courses
- 4 were only in class a few times at the start of the semester
- 2 withdrew officially
- 6 disappeared
- 13 completed course: 6 passed, 7 didn't

These completion and pass rates were about average for spring sections of this course at that College (fall pass rates are higher).

What of my subjective reflections? Teaching this basic writing course did accomplish what I had expected it to. Now I really do know what it means to teach in a City University of New York community college. I have a sense of what basic skills faculty face each semester and of the wide range of knowledge and pedagogical skills they need in order to teach effectively. My awareness of the problems of those faculty and students is sharper and my respect for those who regularly teach basic skills is greater.

As an administrator, I learned or relearned a number of things. Above all, teaching that class reconfirmed my belief that it is important and healthy for academic administrators to teach. It may be best if they can tackle a basic skills course: certainly that will give them a better idea of what's happening on their campus than they could get by teaching an upper-level course (at least I am sure this is true in a community college). Next, I realize just how critical to faculty high quality, resources, and support are. When I reflect that I had only one class and full-time faculty have four, making sure that faculty have adequate secretarial support goes way up on my priority list. Support should also be available to basic skills teachers from faculty colleagues like the informal consultants whose help and counsel were so valuable to me. Despite my years of teaching other kinds of writing courses, it would not have been advisable or prudent for me to have tackled this project without the level of expert support my "con-

sultants" so generously provided. This means giving one or two faculty members release time so that they can serve as a resource and be available to share their experience and expertise.

At a higher level of difficulty (because it costs more) I see more clearly the need to keep class size down in all basic skills courses. My roster shows that, after the first three weeks, the number of students in class was never higher than 18. And that was plenty! Without pretending that it is an ideal size, it seems to me that no basic skills course should enroll more than 21 students.

Fourthly, as I mentioned earlier, my awareness of the skills basic skills faculty must have has been heightened, as has my respect for what they do. This has given me new determination to continue to work for greater recognition of those faculty who are excellent teachers. Proven teaching ability does not play a sufficiently large role in personnel deliberations. Excellence in the classroom should have a status equal to that of publications in reappointment, promotion, and tenure deliberations: certainly in community colleges, and probably in four-year colleges and universities too.

Lastly, I see the urgent need for faculty and administrators to accept their responsibility for developing criteria and procedures for handling those students who have no chance of succeeding in college. Such students fall into two distinct groups: the academically unable and the emotionally or motivationally unable. To take the latter group first: every one of the six students who in the fall semester had dropped out of a basic writing course and then signed up for what became my spring section of that same course, dropped out the second time too. Unless such students can demonstrate to a counselor that there were exceptional extenuating circumstances to account for their repeatedly "walking West," I believe they should not be allowed to register a third time for a place in the same basic skills course. Failure to deal firmly with this group of students has many negative results. Faculty are burdened with the thankless and often hopeless task of working with students sitting in a class for a third or even fourth time. The energy the faculty expend would be better conserved for students on their first and second attempts. Dealing with that group of students also wastes institutional resources and, in my experience, contributes to the pressure to increase class size. ("Why not put a couple more in each section? Half of them drop out anyway," is the argument, and it has a kernel of truth.)

The other group of students, those academically unable to acquire the skills necessary for survival in college cannot be

allowed to flounder until, finally, they are dismissed for failing to meet required minimum requirements (grade point average, course completion, or progress toward degree), or lose heart and give up. From sources such as the 1984 CUNY Task Force Report on Student Retention and Academic Performance, we know that, excluding exceptional circumstances, students who fail any basic skills course twice have virtually no chance of a successful college career. It is, I submit, a cruel hoax to allow students to continue to take courses once it is clear that they will not succeed. My class included no fewer than three such students. Every one had taken the same course at least once before; not one came even close to passing. One was clearly learning disabled, taking for the third time a course he could not possibly pass. What a terrible insult to that student's dignity and sense of self-worth! As professionals we have an obligation to protect those students by developing caring procedures for counselling them into nonacademic ventures, and doing so without harming their dignity.

We cannot take the sheer plod out of our ploughing, but we can at least reduce wasted effort as we strive to make sillion shine.