

“Tell Your Story:
An Affective Approach to Undergraduate Education”
Kaneb Center Outstanding Graduate Student Awards Dinner
Patrick Clauss / April 12, 2017

Introduction: Welcome and Thanks

Good evening. I'd like to begin by thanking faculty at the Kaneb Center for inviting me to speak this evening. I care very much about undergraduate and graduate teaching, and I am honored to join you, especially because of the Kaneb Center's wonderful support of teaching and learning at the University. Since I joined the Notre Dame faculty in 2008, I have attended numerous Kaneb workshops, all of them stimulating and enriching.

Congratulations to the graduate students with us this evening, those of you named Outstanding Graduate Student Teachers. As you know, graduate school presents numerous challenges, but take your award tonight as validation that you're doing a great job. As a fellow teacher, I am grateful for your work. Thank you for your commitment to our students. I am confident that you'll enjoy many similar accomplishments over the course of your career.

Finishing my 9th year at Notre Dame, I am also finishing, counting teaching in my master's and doctoral programs, my 27th year of college teaching. Some students have enjoyed, while hundreds or thousands have endured, my classes in that time. Although I have taught a variety of undergraduate and graduate classes, my career has focused primarily on teaching first-year writing—not exactly most students' favorite class at the University, but one that I find endlessly rewarding to teach.

“Good writing,” I frequently tell my Writing and Rhetoric students, “is clear thinking made visible.” What could be better, what could be more important, than helping undergraduates clarify their thinking? At least this is what I tell myself when I get up at 5:30 on a Saturday morning to read and respond to a stack of freshman essays. That's the price I pay for teaching a subject I love.

Though grading does take a lot of time, there is of course so much more to teaching writing. Your disciplines, too, are complex and varied, as are the pedagogical approaches available to you: Perhaps you teach large lecture courses of 100 or more students; perhaps you lead small-group discussion sessions of 20 or fewer students. No matter your area or approach, you know that teaching matters. You know that your work affects many students.

Regarding effects on students, are you familiar with the following adage? “They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.” Apparently it’s been attributed to numerous sources over the years, including the writer Maya Angelou and the Mormon theologian Carl Buehner. “They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.”

An interesting statement in relation to teaching and learning, especially when one considers that even our best students will—let me break this to you now—almost certainly forget most of what we teach them. Interesting, yes, but in its current form, not really a good guideline for teaching. If our primary purpose were to make students feel good, we could quickly but mistakenly lower our standards and give everyone As. That would free up my Saturday mornings, and it might make our students all feel good, but they certainly wouldn’t learn very much.

So, allow me to modify the quotation just a bit, using it, then, as the frame for my remarks: Instead of “They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel,” with the original implication being “feel *about themselves*,” I offer an expanded, alternative ending: “They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel *about your discipline, about the subject matter they’re learning under your guidance*.” Admittedly, my revision’s not as concise, but it is more powerful, I hope, especially in regard to my concerns here.

Share Your Story

Whether we like it or not, oftentimes our students' perceptions of our subjects are inextricably linked to their perceptions of who we are as teachers. Think back, for instance, to one of your favorite college classes as an undergraduate. In your mind's eye you probably see not only the books, the classroom, or the lab but also the teacher. When I recall one of my favorite undergraduate classes, a Shakespeare class my freshman year, burned into my brain is an image of the professor, Dr. Edelen, standing in the lecture hall holding the Riverside Shakespeare. Decades later, topic and teacher have become linked in my memory.

I tell you this tonight not to make you anxious—take it from me, King Anxious, that there are plenty of other things to worry about in academia. I tell you this tonight to empower you, to encourage you to embrace your relationship with your subject in front of your students. Like any relationship, there's much outside of your control. There are, however, a number of things you can control, one of which, I believe, will affect your students' orientation toward you and, more importantly, your discipline.

My advice tonight is quite simple, really: No matter your subject, no matter your students' ages, abilities, or majors, at some point in the semester, tell them your story.

To clarify: I don't necessarily mean your biography or background, although who you are certainly may be of interest to your students. By "share your story," what I really mean is "share the story of your passion for your subject." This is especially important if you believe, as I do, that as teachers we function as ambassadors for our fields; we can powerfully affect how students feel about our discipline, about not only our discipline's contents but its methods as well.

No matter what you teach—whether it's accounting, mechanical engineering, or zoology—what sparked your interest, originally? When and why did you first realize you wanted to study 19th

century American history, not just at the undergraduate level but at the master's and doctoral levels? Your story matters in your classroom.

Commenting on the power of stories, in his excellent work *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, James Lang, the Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College, explains the following: “the simplest way to tap the emotions of your students is to use the method that every great orator, comedian, emcee, and preacher knows: . . . [tell] a story” (182).

“Human beings,” Lang continues, “are storytelling and story-loving animals” (182). “The human mind seems exquisitely tuned to understand and remember stories—so much so that psychologists sometimes refer to stories as ‘psychologically privileged,’ meaning that they are treated differently in memory than other types of material” (Willingham qtd. in Lang, 182). Lang offers a quick catalog of story suggestions, including “stories of how certain key discoveries were made in your discipline” and “stories about the famous people who have been major thinkers in your field” (183). Tweaking Lang’s suggestions just a bit, again, as I mentioned moments ago, tell the story of your relationship with your area of expertise.

Following my own advice, I’ll share my story, one I tell all of my students during the first week of class, usually on day one of the semester.

When I was growing up in the 1970s, there was of course no such thing as the Internet. No Twitter, no FaceBook, no, as I jokingly tell my students, Snapogram or Instachat. Our television received four channels: ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS. In short, our media options were much more limited than today, but my family subscribed to our city’s local newspaper, delivered to us each afternoon around four o’clock.

In third or fourth grade, when I was 9 or 10 years old, I would sit on the front porch and wait for the paper to arrive, eagerly turning to the comics section. “Peanuts,” “Mutt and Jeff,” and

“Dennis the Menace” were some of my favorites. Soon after that, I discovered the editorial and opinions pages, and I vividly recall, 40 years later, how fascinated I became with the writing contained in these pages.

Whether they addressed mundane topics like local school board elections, or more important national or global topics like the death penalty or US/Soviet relations, the writers of these editorials, it seemed to me, wielded real power: They knew how to use words to influence others, to change the world. At that young age, I sensed that some editorials seemed better, more persuasive, than others. But why, exactly? What made them so? I had no idea, but I knew I wanted to learn more.

It was not until I got to college, as an undergraduate English major, when I discovered the inter-related disciplines I would devote my professional life to: rhetoric and argument. In an advanced composition class my junior year, we read Dr. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” The teacher, a graduate student instructor, made a quick comment one day about King’s use of ethos appeals, also mentioning a book I now have within arm’s reach in my office in Decio: Edward Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*.

Intrigued, I found *Classical Rhetoric* in the university library, and I was thrilled to discover, about a decade after I’d first begun obsessively reading written arguments and wondering about their persuasive power, that not only was there an academic discipline known as rhetoric, but that the study of argumentation and persuasion goes back thousands of years. It was a life-changing moment for me: “This is what I’ve been looking for,” I told myself, “this is amazing.” I had found my academic home, and I realized then that I wanted to study and teach these topics. I also realized that my undergraduate degree would barely even scratch the surface of what I wanted to know. There would be so much to study, so much to pursue! Thus, after my bachelor’s degree, a master’s and then doctorate followed, and here I am today: as fascinated by the study of argument and rhetoric as ever before.

Granted, this is not the most exciting story—it's no *Godfather* or *Lord of the Rings*—but I believe my story matters in my classroom: It signals to students that I care very deeply about the topics we study. For four decades now, I've been fascinated by two inter-related questions: One, what makes an argument persuasive? Two, what makes an argument valid or true? When I read letters to the editor now, I'm more skilled at answering those questions than when I was a 10 or 11-year old boy, but I have yet to lose that child's fascination. Advanced study has deepened my drive and opened more questions.

I'll admit here that sometimes students laugh at my story. What a strange kid, they're probably thinking to themselves. I'm absolutely okay with that. Sure, it's nerdy or weird, but so what? I'm proud of my persistent interest in my field. Isn't this what our students deserve, scholars and teachers who love what they do, who love the never-ending quest to know more?

You wouldn't be here tonight if you didn't have such a story of your own. Something piqued your interest in your field, years ago or more recently. What was it? More specifically, what could you tell your students about your relationship with what you study and teach? I bet it's really interesting, and even more so, I bet that telling it would go a long way toward sparking students' interests, too.

Enthusiasm is contagious, and while not every student will be affected by or interested in your story, experience has shown me that enough students will, certainly enough to make it worth 10 minutes of class one day. If my calculations are correct, you have 2,250 minutes with students in a typical semester at Notre Dame. Ten minutes would be less than one half of one percent of total class time. I think your curriculum and schedule can allow it.

Conclusion: Wrapping Up, Looking Ahead

I'd like to end this evening with one more teaching-related story: I have two children, a 16-year old son and a 19-year old daughter. My daughter is currently a freshman at my undergraduate

alma mater, Indiana University at Bloomington. Watching from afar as she navigates her freshman year where I went to school has had me feeling nostalgic lately. So, on a whim a couple of weeks ago, I Googled the names of a handful of professors I had at IU.

Wouldn't it be something, I thought to myself, if Julia could study Shakespeare's plays with Dr. Edelen or Dickinson's poetry with Dr. Rosenfeld? Most of the faculty members I could remember are now retired, and, sadly, some have passed away, including one of my favorite professors, Dr. Berkvam. While reading about Dr. Berkvam's career as a scholar and teacher of French literature, I discovered a Memorial Resolution his colleagues had written in his honor. One line struck me as noteworthy.

Describing Professor Berkvam's unwavering commitment to his students, his colleagues explain that, "As a teacher, Michael imposed the rule of never teaching a course he wouldn't want to take himself." What an interesting principle: Never teach a course you wouldn't want to take yourself.

Certainly, few of us have the professional standing to dictate to our department chairs what we do and do not want to teach. But when Professor Berkvam's colleagues relate that he imposed such a rule, I'm not sure that's what they mean. I'd like to think that his rule was intended another way: No matter what course he was teaching—whether one he proposed himself or one assigned to him by his department—Professor Berkvam found ways to make the course lively and interesting, not just for students but for himself as well.

Lively and interesting: Therein lies the challenge, right? Tomorrow in Writing and Rhetoric, the students and I will be investigating various manifestations of a rhetorical strategy known as *prolepsis*: the anticipation and answering of a argument before it's been offered by the audience. Over the last decade or so, I've taught some version of that lesson numerous times, more times than I can recall. I am willing to bet that were you to find some students from one of my classes ten years

ago, they almost certainly could not tell you what “prolepsis” means. Those students have long since forgotten most, if not all, of what I said about “the anticipation and answering of an argument.”

However, my hope is that the students remember the reasons for and the effects of the strategy itself, not the name or textbook definition. I also hope that my enduring fascination with prolepsis, with whatever it is I’m teaching, is obvious to my students. In fact, I’ll likely tell them so myself: “Isn’t this cool?” I’ll say; “Isn’t this interesting? I think it is; always have, and always will.” My enthusiasm for the subjects I teach will never wane, and that is, perhaps, the best I can offer those students who pass through my classes over the years. That is one way I make my course something I’d want to take myself.

Let me end where I began: by thanking Kaneb Center faculty for this opportunity and by congratulating those of you selected as Outstanding Graduate Student Teachers. I wish you long and prosperous careers as scholars and teachers. Thank you for your attention this evening. More importantly, thank you for your commitment to your discipline and to our students.