

# Getting Engaged: Reflections on Professor Camp

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**S**trolling on a moonlit beach discussing the meaning of life, walking in a quiet wood, laughing around a campfire, and dancing at midnight with sparklers in our hands are all activities we might associate with romance, but these particular activities are among my memories of a different kind of engagement at the Wakonse Conference on College Teaching, held each Memorial Day weekend on the shore of Lake Michigan at Camp Miniwanca. Also prominent in my mind: late night chats with my roommate from the University of Maryland; freewheeling conversations with my multi-institution discussion group huddled in a cabin in front of a fire; more focused discussions with students and faculty on student engagement, professional goal setting, achieving balance between life and work, the role of spirituality in the classroom; and, perhaps most important in the end, six hours in a van with four colleagues from across campus who are now also my friends.



The Wakonse Conference includes recommended readings, chosen for their inspirational value and ability to provoke discussion. The year before I attended, the selected text was Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*, which coincidentally, I had read in 2000 for a review in *Universities 21*. In 2002, the readings were Richard Light's *Making the Most of College* and Bernard Malamud's *A New Life*. For the September refresher weekend we read and discussed *Good Work* by Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon. Good books all, but I will admit, much to my chagrin as a literature professor, that I found the novel the least satisfying of these texts.

Over the course of the last twelve months, I have attended not only the Wakonse Conference and its refresher weekend at Allerton, but also a Carnegie-sponsored conference on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and the National Collegiate Honors Council Conference, all focused on providing students with a better learning experience and increasing teacher fulfillment. I've also spent time flying above Denali and walking the rims of Bryce and the Grand Canyon, experiences that inspire reflection on all manner of things. In addition to the Wakonse books, I've been reading widely on faculty development, teaching and learning, and leadership (this last in preparation for teaching a Spring 2003 course). I'm completing my fourth online course on online learning, this one on the dreaded "a" word: assessment. As usual, I've accumulated far too much information to process effectively, but the synapses have been firing and what follows are some things to ponder. Many are far ahead of me on some of these issues, having long ago

worked them out satisfactorily. I've found, however, that much of what I knew has been reshaped by the experiences and conversations I've had over the past year. I see the academic world differently now; what I or anyone else might do with this insight is still open to possibilities.

### **How do students perceive the education process?**

At the end of the Fall 2001 semester, students enrolled in EIU 1111, University foundations, participated in the National First Year Initiative Survey. Of these EIU participants, 44% reported they studied 5 hours or fewer per week. 33% reported they study 6-10 hours per week. That national figure in each category was 33%. I was appalled by both the national and Eastern numbers. For a typical course load of 15 hours, faculty believe that 30 hours of outside work can be assigned. Perhaps (I hope) students and faculty are defining study on different levels, but only 1% of the EIU participants and 2% of the national participants reported 25 or more hours per week.

On a scale of 1-7, with 1=significantly, 4=somewhat and 7=not at all, EIU students' mean response to "To what degree did you feel bored in your classes?" was 3.57, compared to the national number of 3.84. Yes, most reported that their first year had been better than expected and that they would recommend EIU to a friend. (Did these students expect college to be boring?) These same students reported more excellent teachers than poor ones. Even students who purport to enjoy a class often celebrate when a meeting is cancelled. The student who declares one of us to be the "best teacher I ever had" may still find myriad excuses for not handing a paper in on time.

These data, though not necessarily representative of our students in general, give us some things to think about, especially when juxtaposed with Richard Light's data in *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*. Light's research, conducted primarily at Harvard, indicates that students want to be challenged. The students at the Wakonse Conference report that they, too, want to be challenged, supporting Light's contention that his findings apply to places other than the Ivy League.

Many students also tell me that college is easier than they thought it would be. Many faculty, on the other hand, seem to think the current generation of students is unmotivated and under-prepared. Bored students, frustrated faculty, yet the educational machine continues to grind out graduates competent in their fields, and these students continue to get jobs and grow into professionals, many of them educators. These same students, as alumni, report in large numbers that they were satisfied with their education and that they feel they were well prepared to face life's challenges.

## **Student Engagement**

Orientation leaders often tell a joke to parents that they should get to know one another because their future in-laws are probably in the room. Many students do indeed celebrate graduation and engagement in the same year. Whether they have been "engaged" in their classes, however, is quite another matter. The Wakonse student participants defined student engagement in a number of ways, from "the active participation of students both in and out of class" to "being involved with my education. It involves the professor taking an interest in how well I am doing inside and outside of the classroom. I also have to make an effort to talk to my professors and other students to discuss class issues in order to be engaged." Many look at education in much the same was Parker Palmer does, as a connection between students and professors around and through the subject of a course. In the end, students must have part ownership in order to be engaged.

Students want to be challenged, but that does not mean they want their education to be hard. Sometimes our efforts to challenge succeed in frustrating students instead. At Wakonse, I had the opportunity to discuss the rather fine line between challenge and frustration with students who knew I really cared about their opinions. The novelty of faculty asking students for advice in and of itself increases students' investment in their education. What we might do in our classes or during student conferences is only part of the story, though.

Richard Light reports that "how students study and do homework assignments outside of class is a far stronger predictor of engagement and learning than particular details of their instructor's teaching style" (51). Study groups both in and out of class encourage student engagement through interaction with their peers. By constructing assignments that are challenging, faculty may inspire students to work together. Light also suggests that scheduling classes right before dinner encourages out-of-class group study in that students will continue a good discussion begun in class through the dinner hour.

Challenging material, group study, and, hardly surprising to English faculty, writing are all identified by Light as components of effective classes. Students "related the intellectual challenge of a course to the amount of writing it requires and they reported a higher level of engagement in courses that required multiple writing assignments" (56). The more surprising finding is that students would prefer more writing instruction later in their college careers. Even Harvard students seem vocationally minded in their opinions on writing instruction:

The overwhelming majority argue that the best time to emphasize writing is during junior and senior years....the seniors feel that in their first year they didn't fully appreciate writing instruction—even the many who in retrospect believe it was excellent. Most viewed it at the time as "just another

course requirement."....the seniors point out that writing instruction helps most when students want it. (59)

These comments imply that students do indeed value writing at a level above other general education skills. Rather than seeing writing classes as preparing them for success in other college courses, however, students are looking beyond college to the workplace, where they realize they will indeed need to write and think well. Writing instruction is too important, they tell us, to be just another course they need to "get out of the way."

Both the students at Wakonse and Light's respondents want to get to know their faculty and want their faculty to know them. A young man from Westminster College reflected on the Wakonse experience, "This week I was better able to see the human side of the professors." A young woman from the University of Maryland was surprised by what she found at Wakonse: "The most surprising part of the conference for me has been the overall positive faculty reception of our suggestions. Many of the faculty members seem genuinely interested in hearing what advice we had to offer." The faculty participants at Wakonse remarked on how exceptional these students were—interested, perceptive, open-minded—, and the students had similar opinions of us. We got to know each other at Camp Miniwanca, and for those few weeks we all, students and faculty alike, were indeed engaged.

While at Wakonse, many of us concluded that we naturally experienced these epiphanies because we had all chosen to attend the conference and were thus ready to experience a change in attitude. I now believe, however, that the nature of the conference itself, a retreat into the woods for an intensive four-day experience focused on how we teach and why we teach, makes it a transformative experience. The staff repeatedly challenged us to think about how we could take this "Spirit of Wakonse" home with us.

### **Faculty Engagement**

So here I sit, wearing my Wakonse sweatshirt and sipping tea out of my Wakonse mug, wondering how much of that "spirit" has followed me home. Some signs are obvious: I've initiated a faculty circles program for new tenure-track hires that I learned about at the conference. I chair the Faculty Development Steering Committee, and have tried to increase student engagement in my classes through my own engagement both in my subjects and in my teaching. In the end, the biggest change is that I've become more reflective. I've turned the very mirror I ask my students to turn on themselves back on myself. Lifelong learning must for me extend beyond learning more about my research fields to learning more about my goals and motivations in the classroom.

I try to do "good work," as defined by Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon. I've always had a good sense of the first two of the three issues they identify in Good

Work: mission (why society should reward the kind of work I do) and standards (the best practices in the field). What I've taken away from Wakonse is a stronger commitment to the third issue: integrity. These authors ask professionals to take the mirror test and imagine "What would it be like to live in a world if everyone were to behave in the way that I have?" (12). There are still days I don't like what I see in that mirror, but I've stopped avoiding looking into it merely because I'm afraid of what I might see. Palmer defines a true commitment to teaching as letting go of our fears; as I uncover my own, I find I am a more engaged, more compassionate teacher, and even a more demanding one. As I spend more time thinking not so much about what I teach but how to get students to care about what they might learn, I find that the frustrations do not disappear but are easier to deal with.

Teaching is an art of oral tradition, and just as the bards gained energy and inspiration from their audiences, I gain that energy and inspiration from my students. If they are not engaged, I can "perform" all I want, but I won't be doing good work. The responsibility for engagement lies with both students and faculty. If I model not only knowledge, but reflection and a critical awareness of myself and my own fears and prejudices, maybe my students will get to know me and be less afraid to let me know them, and together we can approach literature and art with renewed vigor.

Digital photos set to music close the Wakonse Conference. In May, the class of 2002 laughed at the sometimes embarrassing poses in which the photographers had caught us, and we sighed over the shots of the beautiful surroundings in which we had spent the last five days. Various modern and contemporary songs played in the background, the most haunting of which was Shaun Colvin's "Never Saw Blue Like That," which captured the essence of the lake, the sky, and the flowers of Camp Miniwanca. The lyrics echo in my mind as I continue to reflect on my reading and experiences over the past year:

*No one else has ever shown me how  
To see the world the way I see it now  
Oh I, I never saw blue like that before.*

I'm not the teacher I was when I left for Wakonse last May. I haven't had the time or the opportunity to change everything I want about the way I go about my work, but I have a far better awareness of what I need to do to make it good.

## Works Cited

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