

Reflective Portfolio

Jon Tracosas Adjunct Professor

July 2020

Background Perspective

Before I start, here is some pertinent background perspective on my teaching experience:

I am new to FIT and to formal teaching.

As we enter the Fall 2020 semester, I have taught a total of four classes—60 hours; from the Fall of 2018 through the Spring of 2020. All my FIT teaching experience to date has involved instruction for AC114.

This Fall, however, I will be taking on an additional course, AC412 Creative Advertising Strategies.

So, my teaching life will be getting exponentially more intense: two courses, covid-19, remote classes.

Prior to FIT I was an ad guy for 40+years.

I worked at several “name” agencies (JWT, O&M, FCB, Deutsch, Arnold) at senior executive levels (President, CMO, CSO, EVP). While not a “teacher” per se, I mentored many and was a mentee of some exceptionally talented people who *taught* me a great many invaluable things, among them both the art and science of teaching, coaching, instructing...

At JWT, in the days when it was known as the “university of advertising”, I led the Training Program.

It was a basic introduction to advertising and JWT for newly hired account, creative and media recruits.

It was great fun and a terrific experience.

One other piece of background seems appropriate here:

I attended Cornell University. I played football for the Big Red. Among the many memorable learnings

I have taken from my Cornell experience in the classroom and on the football field, was the admonition from my linebacker coach: “You play like you practice!” Meaning, how you prepare, how you study, how you drill, how you work during the practice week will dictate how (well or poorly) you play in the game on Saturday: “You play like you practice.” Simple and true.

I always told that to the people who worked with and for me. And, I tell that to my students today.

Now to reflective essay...

1. Define your teaching philosophy

I have four “principles” I have come to rely on that suit me as a teacher.

#1.) Interactivity

I have always believed in the Socratic method; asking questions, having a “to and fro” with my students, asking “what if”, getting them to think critically, outside their comfort zone, to play devil’s advocate, to challenge them and deconstruct consensus thinking.

#2.) Repetition

My high school English teacher—when I reunited with him for lunch several months ago after more than 50 years and described to him how I teach—gave me the Latin dictum for how knowledge is gained which I have now made part of my syllabus:

“Repetitio est mater studiorum”. Repetition is the mother of learning.

#3.) Energy begets energy

Always bring your “A game”. Passion and energy are infectious and invite participation.

A lively, attuned class is more fun than a dull one. It is where learning takes place, when the class is ready to absorb ideas.

#4.) Feedback

I think feedback—good or bad—is instructive. As a teacher, I need to know what is working and what is not, especially now, when we are all trying to figure out what works best in this new

environment. Sooner is better than later. If something needs to be tweaked or disbanded altogether, better to do it earlier when you can make a course correction than later when the course is ending. There are no “do-overs”.

2. Have you ever observed a master teacher? If the answer is yes, what do you recall most from the experience?

Yes. If, “master teacher” means a teacher who has great command of her subject and the teaching setting—lecture hall, class room, and now, the computer screen; knows the subject matter so well she can convey it simply, clearly, convincingly; is respected; is approachable; is empathetic; understands what is in the best interests of her students; and knows how to connect with her students as a group or as an individual. If this is what the meaning of “master teacher” approximates, then I was fortunate to have had several of these types of experiences, in college, high school, and, in the 3rd grade.

Professor LaFeber, Cornell, American History/Foreign Affairs.

LaFeber was a god. Imagine this...several hundred students packed in a lecture hall, very noisy. LaFeber enters the room, strides purposefully to a blackboard at the center of the stage, quickly chalks an outline of six or so discussion points and as he turns to the assembled throng the room hushes to a complete silence and remains so for the next 48 minutes.

Throughout this time LaFeber lectures brilliantly, no notes, no slides.

He recites whole speeches from memory.

He tells such a compelling story that we are at first spell-bound; then, trying to capture every word, we take notes detailed notes of his talks—not lectures—talks. He told the story of American history.

His class was a singular experience. He was a true master.

(He was also remarkably accessible and would have extended office hours for students to visit with him, ask questions, go further.)

Mr. Conroy, Ardsley HS, 11th grade English and Mrs. Alfano, Dobbs Ferry Elementary, 3rd grade.

Both exceptional teachers. Both were respected. Both had a significant pedagogical and personal impact on my life.

Mr. Conroy: Sensing that as 16-year-old hot shot high school athlete, I might need an attitude adjustment, he loaned me his copy of Updike’s *Rabbit Run*, which made a timely and lasting impression on me.

Mrs. Alfano: Realized that I was having difficulty reading, in fact I could barely read. But, she also noticed that I loved baseball and that I had an impressive collection of baseball cards. Understanding what teaching was all about, she used my baseball card collection with player biographies and stats on the back of each card as her teaching tool.

She taught me how to read.

She opened new world to me—reading—that I have loved and became a daily, integrally obsessive part of my life, ever since.

All three of these teachers were in total command of their subjects, but in very different ways and styles. All three understood, instinctively, intuitively, how to reach and connect with their students. All three, in my estimation were, “masters”.

3. Examples of successful and unsuccessful lessons and why.

At times, the content/subject matter of AC114 can be mechanistic and tedious.

The first time I taught one of the more laborious sections I was not ready for it.

I had not anticipated, not prepared, not imagined, not projected well enough about how this lesson would come across to my students.

This was my “teachable moment”—how do I connect with my students every class, for every subject?

I am at my best, when I am most prepared, when I am not only comfortable with the subject matter—I know the material first-hand—, but when I have planned and rehearsed, rather precisely, how the class will go.

More often than not, my most successful classes have a spontaneity to them—that occurs seemingly organically—when I’ve been able to have a good back and forth with my students and attain an energy level that creates an *attention connection*, an enhanced receptivity with them.

4. Why are you introducing and/or expanding the use of technology into your teaching?

For several reasons:

- I want to replicate the in-person experience as best I can and as technologies will enable.
--As stated above, I want to attain in a remote teaching environment, as much student to teacher interactivity and student to student interaction as possible.
Various technologies can help accomplish this—Working in Groups will be a primary vehicle to achieve this, both during class sessions and at other times.
- I want to have multiple methods of communication to keep students attentive and involved.
--I plan on breaking up my class time with my lectures, cutaways to teaching videos, breakouts, and voice-threads.
--I plan on using innovative technologies like Padlet to create new learning opportunities
- Importantly, my new class AC412 Creative Strategies, unlike my other course, will involve much less lecturing and much more interactivity among the students and with me.
--AC412 has no textbook. I am developing the course materials as we speak and as I do I am calibrating where, when, and how technology will enhance my course, my performance, and my students learning.

5. How do you feel these new technologies will affect the student experience.

My goal for my students is to be a catalyst for a superior experience; that my extensive knowledge and expertise will be enabled and amplified by new ways of expression, connection, and communications.

6. How will you evaluate the success of your activities?

As I have in the past: Quantitatively, Qualitatively, and, perhaps most importantly, via direct student Feedback. The Remote Learning Course has impressed upon me that I need to have a thoughtful plan to maximize and measure student involvement, interaction, and feedback.

7. What are your thoughts about the “bigger picture” regarding technology and learning?

John Barry, in his seminal tour de force historical bestseller, “*The Great Influenza*”, spent some of the early pages of the book tracing the history of medical learning, teaching and knowledge or lack thereof. He, rather remarkably, showed how little the subject had been advanced since the time of Hippocrates to the mid-1800’s.

He brilliantly explains what little new learning and therefore teaching was taking place was siloed abroad in a few, non-US countries, cities and universities.

For me, Barry in this simple short sentence captured with great insight and relevance my response to the question above—

“Knowledge is useless unless accessible.”

Accessibility, in my view, relative to the question, has two interpretations:

- #1, Today, because of technological innovation, with just a click of a computer key we have unprecedented *physical access* to things, data, information.
--(I recognize that this *physical access* is only theoretically accessible to all. Issues of cost, hardware quality, connectivity make this problematic and elusive, nonetheless, democratization of the internet is a distinctly realizable goal.)
- #2, However, for information to be *useful*, to turn it into *knowledge* it needs to be contextualized, made relevant. “*Accessibility*”, in this sense means understanding, and to understand something involves teaching, the act of being taught.

Technology, then is a conduit, a tool—albeit a phenomenal, potentially transformative tool, but a tool nonetheless. Unto itself it is, arguably, useless.

Knowledge, on the other hand, is something that is gained—learned on the building blocks of teaching—the symbiotic interaction between pupil and pupil; pupil and pedagogue, where exponential benefits are accrued.

I’ll go out on a limb here and say the fundamentals of learning and teaching are immutable and timeless; they remain cornerstones for students, teaching, and teachers going forward i.e,

- *The Socratic method*
- *Repetition...Repetitio est mater studiorum*
- *Learning small...in chunks, incrementally, like building blocks (the book “Small Teaching” by J. Lang recommended to me by E. Moldanado should be credited here.)*
- and Benjamin Franklin’s axiom will, I think, will always apply
“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”

This said, technology married to these immutables of pedagogy are to me the big picture.

The relationship will make knowledge both accessible and more useful—for my Fall classes and well beyond.

