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# 1 | Introduction

At first I had in mind a set of memoirs filled with lasting moments in and around my classroom, interactions with students and colleagues, the worst and best experiences on campus, moments of reflection about those I hold dear who mentored me in my career as teacher and scholar: what you might expect from a prof who has held one and only one job his entire professional life, a job—how I hate to call it that—he’s loved from day one and continues to cherish. Having completed my fiftieth year of service at Colgate University, a small liberal arts college in upstate New York, I have told so many teaching-related stories that friends have suggested I ought to catalog them by number.

Then I began to think more about the serious, complex issues involved in the process of teaching and learning. I had thought about them before, discussed them with fellow educators, even played a role in implementing new ways of educating young people at the college: How do you measure effective teaching? Is there really a conflict between creating knowledge (scholarship) and disseminating it (teaching)? How do you hold to a college’s mission

to offer the very best education in a changing world, a world in which the teacher and what he teaches has lately been cast in shadowy light? I needed to deal with these pressing issues too. I wondered: Does all that I have to share about what I have lived and learned from more than half a century in the classroom, a time that covers more than one-fourth of the entire existence of the venerable institution I still serve, require two separate books?

Almost never having come across a book about education that wasn't as dry as dust, I decided to use salient memories to support and enhance themes related to modes of acquiring and disseminating knowledge to young people. *Class Not Dismissed* is my attempt to parlay what friends call my natural sense of humor with my take on the profession by threading stories, some laughable, others deeply serious, into a narrative that gets at things I believe are important to both teachers and students (I've italicized them in the text). My goal is to share real stories about everyday college life that might help promote a dialogue on serious educational issues, many of which, even after all these years, I still haven't fully worked out.

As is obvious from the table of contents, I have chosen the standard journalistic "why? what? how?" format to set up the narrative. "Why I Teach" (chapter 2) begins with the qualities I remember best in those who inspired me to make life choices. I also take account of what fellow teachers have to say about their memorable mentors and why they share my profession. As you might guess, it's all about passion. So much of what delights us as teachers emanates from paying witness to what I like to call the "breathing process." Learning is like being born. It begins with a gasp, an unsteady, assisted intake of knowledge and ideas in a strange, threatening environment. Then it gradually grows, settles in, becomes more deeply rooted and more controlled. Effective learning has so much to do with your ability to take over and breathe on your own. To breathe life into my account, I've incorporated stories of my own unsteady breaths as a novice teacher.

Chapter 3, "What I Teach," opens with the horror story of the first time I was asked to conduct a class in a subject area I knew little about. My initial resistance to the liberal arts processual mandate of helping students become aware of the values that lie at the core of their identities loomed as a frightening task. There I was, stranded in an intellectual wilderness, worlds away from home discipline. I also share my thoughts and feelings about another uncomfortable struggle in which I tried to balance dedication to my own

specialty and an increasing desire to contribute to a new interdisciplinary inquiry.

My narrative necessitates dealing with a little history about where the idea of the liberal arts originated and how it developed and changed in the American academy, especially at my home institution. Little did I realize, when I entered Colgate as a yet-uncertified professional astronomer at age twenty-five, that I would be called upon to spearhead the first major revision of the college's general education program in the post-World War II era. Some of the bizarre suggestions I received from fellow profs about how to revise gen ed (a task I've likened to moving a graveyard), though sincerely intended, are too precious not to share, especially those I encountered in dialogues with my imaginative colleagues next to the fancy espresso machine I purchased with a large chunk of my first year's budget—all in the spirit of promoting academic discourse.

What does it mean to be educated? Is it only about acquiring a body of knowledge, or does it have as much to do with experiencing the process of how you come to know what you never knew before? Product vs. process: that's the essential tension between the two goals that challenge all teachers. I deal with this in chapter 4, "How I Teach." Because I believe in learning by sharing both negative and positive experiences, I begin with stories that taught me how *not* to teach. Much of my "how" section focuses on method and the big debate about whether to lecture or lead discussions. Both are viable teaching techniques, and each requires a lot of time and thought for a teacher to become really effective. Rather than simply resort to boring lists of how to do this or how not to do that, again I thought it best to convey my ideas on methods of teaching through storytelling. I want to share some engaging tales of life experience in the classroom as a way to raise questions about how we all might make teaching more effective.

Chapter 5, "Questioning Teaching," is a bit more opinionated. Here I single out what I believe are the most pressing problems and issues confronting teachers and students: Should professors be given tenure, essentially a guaranteed job for life? Where do the roles of parents and teachers crisscross one another? How should we assess quality teaching? How much attention should be paid to student as opposed to peer evaluation? Can vocational training and the liberal arts coexist constructively? Where does technology belong in the classroom? What's behind the current lecture-on-a-laptop trend? Will the

Free Internet College transform the future of American education? Finally, I end on one of today's most hotly debated questions. Being a student today is a far cry from what it was when I enrolled in college: the debt crisis didn't exist, and there were jobs aplenty. So, why go to college anyway?

Having been involved in interdisciplinary studies long before it became fashionable, my perspective on education tends to be a bit broader than that of most college teachers. Though I was trained in the sciences, I hold a joint appointment in the social sciences, a result of venturing long ago outside my discipline of astronomy into what stargazing means in other cultures. (They call that anthropology in the academy.) I've also held visiting appointments in the humanities at other universities. And I have written books, including two for children, that cut across the trinity of curricula: the sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

In sum, I wrote *Class Not Dismissed* because I felt the need to say something about what academic life is like in practice. I want to share the joy and the despair, the high and the low points in a profession I would trade for no other. Passion. That's the single quality I wish those who read this book would feel about what they do with their lives, no matter what profession they may choose. So whether you're a fellow teacher, a student in or about to enter college, or one who has been there and has had occasion to reflect on your experience of college life, I hope my stories about life and learning connect with you.