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Teaching on a College Campus: Embracing Change

I love my job, my profession and being a theatre professor at Ohio State. I arrived in the United States in the 1970s with an American husband, a career in advertising in the international corporate arena, and no particular desire to leave Europe. I never dreamed then that years later, I would be living and working in Columbus, introducing hundreds of college students to the art of theatre. As a somewhat reluctant immigrant, I became an enthusiastic cheerleader after the discovery of one of the most amazing treasures offered by this country, access to higher education. Like others before me I learned that, with determination, you can educate or

even re-educate yourself to do anything you want to do and *Be anything you want to Be*. And, unlike other countries, you may do this at *any age*. I took advantage of this opportunity, changed career fields a couple of times, became a non-traditional student, became an American, became a professor and, along the way, fell in love with the art and craft of teaching. This was ironic as my parents, along with my high school headmistress (a Cambridge-educated nun) at my Catholic girl's school, had tried unsuccessfully to interest me in a teaching career. In Beatles-era London, we rebelled at the thought of an *acceptable* profession and I opted for the glamour of an

advertising career in Mayfair, enjoying a fast-paced lifestyle where *change was always cool*. When I was sent to Frankfurt to create *Pepsi-Cola* and *Kraft* commercials for the Americanization of modern Germany, I was introduced to professional actors and to the world of theatre.

Advertising, teaching and theatre share a common characteristic, the need to quickly transform and to adapt to change. What intrigues me about the craft of teaching is that whether student or teacher, you are always learning something new and, when you think you have mastered a problem, there is always another to take its place. To survive as a professor on a college campus, in whatever discipline, you learn to keep yourself open to change. The recurring stimulus for change for me invariably has been my students. If I pay careful attention to their questions and problems, solutions that I might never consider myself, present themselves. And then there is *technology*. To keep up with my own classes, and the expectations of today's student, I am learning more new techniques, new ideas, new technology, new methods of teaching and learning

than ever before. The changing technology is testing me to my limits. The need to embrace change is in every class, whether my large lecture of 400 students or my intimate studio of 12, whether I am teaching first-year undergraduates, or leading a doctoral seminar. I must adjust rapidly between the explosive energy of the group of 400 to the focused intensity of the studio or seminar.

In the spirit of enthusiasm which greeted the millennium, I began to consider redesigning our large *Introduction to Theatre* class which had been a fixture on the Ohio State campus for twenty-seven years, directed by the late Dr. Charles Ritter, before I took over its leadership. The traditional MWF lecture format, was augmented by T/Th recitation discussion sessions, with daytime, weekend, night, and honors lectures.

This format had served the course well, framed in a chronological structure, presenting the history and practice of western and American theatre and film, the reading of representative plays and the attendance at departmental performances.

Toward the end of the 1980s, I was asked by one of our

Teaching Assistants why we did not study feminist theatre, Asian theatre or African American theatre and why I used the term *actor* when discussing the craft of acting, ignoring *actress*? The discussions that followed resulted in a major overhaul of Theatre 100 in 1990, introducing a multicultural world view and gender neutral emphasis. We added topics such as East African, Japanese, Chinese, and Indian theatre, brought in visiting guest lecturers, and as the course expanded into the largest of its kind in the country, organized fieldtrips by chartered bus of 1,200 students to professional theatre downtown.

Ten years later, I was fairly satisfied with how things were going. We now routinely examined classic and contemporary plays, brought visiting guest professionals to lecture, invited our own faculty to share insights about their professional work, and toured our students backstage to become better informed audiences. We even collaborated with University police in staging simulated real-life dramatic confrontations. Nevertheless, student evaluations were losing enthusiasm. Some said they found theatre and the performing arts to be boring. One commented, "*I*

would rather cut off my arm than sit through another lecture by Reilly!" I posted it on my office door. In ten years our student body had changed. We would have to change, too.

I enlisted the help of our own undergraduates to find a new direction. We invited members of the department's *Writing Company* to share their own original monologues and short scenes in our lecture. Some monologues were interactive performances with their own *talking heads* video. Our student audience was fully present and fascinated by what their peers had to say. Next we created some experimental recitation sections, canceled one of our two midterms, and organized the recitations into active-learning teams of 7 or 8 people. Each group, working as a production team under a stage manager, observes deadlines and creates its own creative response to a play read in class. Students select the role of set designer, costume designer, sound designer, playwright, videographer, director or actor. Each person is required to make a live presentation in recitation class as either stage manager, playwright, designer, director or actor. The performance

may also be filmed. For the first time ever in such a large theatre class, we found a way for every student to explore their creativity, while learning to work collaboratively as a team. The very best work is shared with all students in lecture. At the same time we introduced an active learning component, we also applied for and received grant money to develop new technological tools. We introduced Web CT, enabling threaded discussions and developed new electronic lectures and quizzes. One of our department's graduate students designed a state-of-the-art Virtual Theatre that duplicated the department's own Bowen Theatre and allows students to experiment as Director and Designer in a virtual theatre environment. We designed a special option for seniors to do an individual project if they choose, focusing on the task of the theatre critic. It took a year to work out the bugs. We crashed the Web CT system more than once, when large numbers of our students tried to

take electronic quizzes late on a Sunday night. But with the suggestions of our TAs, a team of technology specialists, and the ideas of our undergraduates, we ended up reinventing the syllabus, changing the lecture structure, incorporating state of the art technology and providing a cutting edge active learning component.

To our surprise, in a course geared to non-majors, the most popular assignment by far in the newly revised course has turned out to be the creative project. Students from all majors in the university collaborate in the creative process: imagining, researching, planning, writing, selecting, arranging and presenting their work as a team. Today's class would not be recognizable to students of even a couple of years ago. The most innovative work is performed or presented in Lecture, where we are continually amazed and inspired by the extraordinary creativity and energy that results. And I discover again why I love being a theatre professor at Ohio State.