

What The Cat Brings In: A Few Lessons on Teaching

MARIAN LUPO,
*2006 Graduate Associate
Teaching Award Winner
College of Humanities*

I came to teaching obliquely — almost accidentally — never imagining that I would "grow up" (if ever I did) to become a teacher. As an undergraduate, I was not a really good student; I wanted to learn, sure, and I was always curious intellectually, but I never learned how to work for a high grade. A lot like many other undergraduates at institutions of higher learning, large and small! In addition, I did not have positive experiences as an undergraduate; teaching was a secondary concern at my university. (In all fairness, though, it is possible, that as "not a really good student," I might not have been paying attention.) Finally, I had a practical bent that seemed at odds with college teaching as I experienced it as an undergraduate. Coming from an amiable, down-to-earth Midwestern background, I experienced college teaching at my East Coast undergraduate university as slightly vain, even elitist, and certainly rarified.

Upon graduation, my dominant emotion was relief, and if I had thought about it, the notion of ever stepping foot back into an undergraduate classroom as a teacher would have struck me as likely as playing starting quarterback for the Buckeyes.

But I was encouraged to consider teaching by my law professors, whom I respected, especially on this point, most likely because, as a friend pointed out, any one of them could be making a lot more money doing "anything but teaching." I figured they knew something about teaching I didn't. And so I accepted a part-time position teaching in the night program at a law school while I worked during the day. I taught in the Legal Career Opportunities Program, which accepted non-traditional students, which struck me as right, since I was a non-traditional teacher.

On my first night in that classroom, just at that liminal moment, that pause when the class is over but the students have not yet begun packing up their bags, I experienced an epiphany, one of those moving moments that changes one's life forever. Although hard to capture with words, in essence, I suddenly realized that teaching was the most worthwhile activity in the world! Not a worthwhile activity or one of several worthwhile activities, but the most worthwhile of all activities - if I could do it well. I suddenly "got" what teaching was about.

That epiphany brought me to the work I do now as a teacher. I did not make the commitment to teaching lightly. I taught for several years in the evening at a community college, and my greatest obstacle was not my legal background or my undergraduate performance in college: it was the lack of really good role models as an undergraduate. Working through that contradiction has been one of the driving forces in my efforts to improve my teaching.

I applied to graduate school hoping to become a better teacher, knowing I needed to learn from good teachers and great experiences. I studied my teachers closely, watching what worked and didn't work from my new perspective as a graduate student. I chose the best role models I could find, and I deliberately chose Professor Brenda Jo Brueggemann as my advisor not only because of her exceptional scholarship, but also because she is an outstanding teacher. And she hails from Kansas, both literally and figuratively, the middle of America, the place where I feel most at home!

I also took course work in pedagogy with Professor Brueggemann, co-authored an article with her on teaching, shadowed two teachers I particularly admire (James Fredal and Sue Lape, both teaching in the English Department at OSU), participated in or led many teaching brown bags, took workshops in computer pedagogy, and became deeply involved in the leading conference for teaching development in my field.

In addition to that rare motivating epiphany, I confess to possessing a secret resource: my many years as a cat rescuer. In my own abode, no matter its size, I have sheltered and fed up to eighteen cats at any one time (just about the average size of my classes).

It all began when my one house cat, Catguy, a sociable "guy that looked like a cat," began inviting strays into my house by sitting in the window and meowing to them. First one, then another cat would sit on my doorstep waiting for me to let them in. I hesitate to even call this "cat rescue," since each guest entered with that well-known air of the royal cat prerogative. Perhaps "cat servant" is a better term! But one cat led to another, and I found myself with a serious cat rescue operation working with a few veterinarians to take care of these royal refugees, to locate their former home (if possible), and to place the ones that could (and would) be adopted in new homes.

Teaching is very much like herding cats. To herd cats means trying to understand the background the cat brings with it - all those experiences a stray cat does not articulate but you have to pick up through experience and observation. It means accepting that the cat will not obey by rote, but will follow the general guidelines to the extent it accepts those guidelines as reasonable. To persuade a cat that you are being reasonable requires a mutual relationship of trust and respect. Finally, cats are inherently joyful, playful, and curious. To herd cats means building upon those characteristics.

Most importantly, you need to recognize each cat as a distinct and unique personality, and the cats need to know you so recognize them. This approach allowed me, for example, to teach one stray to learn that subtle distinction between jumping from tree to roof of house (acceptable activity) to walking along the edge of the cat-proofed fence (ingenious but unacceptable activity that will be imitated by other cats).

My growth as a teacher has, in many ways, paralleled my growth as erstwhile cat herder. I worried over the first few strays: Would they gain weight? How did they get here? But then, as the cat rescue operation grew bigger, I became less worried and less strict. I realized cats make their own decisions; not that much was in my hands. All I could do was set up the conditions where the cat would be happy and prosper.

Likewise, I worried over my first few undergraduate classes. Are they going to turn in their papers? Are they even going to come to class? But the more I taught, the more I realized that, again, students make their own decisions. I began to relax as a teacher and focus more on what was going on in the classroom. Again, as with the cats, I turned my energy into creating the conditions where students would be happy to be in class and prosper as students.

But what exactly does the cat bring into the classroom?

My basic principle of both herding cats and teaching undergraduates is to establish a relationship of trust. This means giving the students a syllabus that is as straightforward and complete as possible at the very beginning of the quarter. I make it clear on the first day exactly what the course requires and how they will be graded. I also specifically tell them that I will not add to their work along the way nor change my grading criteria midstream. To establish trust also means giving the students the benefit of a doubt. If I trust them, they are more likely to trust me. For example, in my English 304 class, when almost the entire class submitted an assignment, the business proposal, entirely at odds with what I thought they should be submitting, rather than assume they were taking the easy way out, I gave them a safe opening to discuss their work.

To do this required application of principle number two, a happy student (like a happy cat) learns more easily than an unhappy student (or unhappy cat). Using humor and encouraging exuberance creates a relaxed environment in which learning can happen and students can become enthusiastic about their work. In discussing this particular assignment with my 304 students, I first began by telling them that I thought there must be a problem with the Carmen discussion board where they were to post their assignments. I told them that Carmen must have cut off their assignments, because they were all so short. I held up the stack of the assignments I had printed from Carmen and said, "Well, I went back to Carmen, but I couldn't find the rest of these papers," all the while shaking my head in bewilderment over the inexplicable vagaries of technology. I carried on this way for a few minutes until the students began laughing and volunteered to rewrite the assignment. This gave us a relaxed space where I could ask them what they were thinking when they completed the assignment and to painlessly understand and correct my own teaching errors.

I now design each course to include their goals, a teaching strategy I learned from Professor Brueggemann, not simply to make the course a collaborative experience, although that is important, but also to implement principle number three, respect and try to understand the actual place a student is coming from. Like a stray, each student brings a wealth of knowledge, unique to that student's former place or places, to the classroom. Respecting that and understanding that helps them share their knowledge with each other. We are all wiser. Respecting them also means respecting their own agendas for being in college and to acknowledge that they, like cats, make their own decisions. Thus, I routinely tailor the coursework to their needs. For example, during Winter Quarter 2006, the issue of nursing homes came to the forefront with several students in English 277; to address this issue, I invited a special speaker into the classroom. The students were so excited about this speaker that one student, like Catguy, invited a friend.

Of course, there are no average students any more than there are average cats; every student has the potential to excel but that means implementing principle number four, recognize the distinct and unique learning personality each student brings into the classroom. In my 367 class one quarter, for example, I worked with an engineering student to help him design a final project in keeping with his interests and strengths: his final project, a paper on the rhetoric of the robot, included building a robot that delivered candy in class. In English 277, one student's major interest was in tending to snakes with disabilities, snakes whose long spines curve and move in surprising ways. I encouraged her to bring her snakes into the class, which helped the entire class understand disabilities from another perspective and gave her the validation to build her final project around reptiles with disabilities. This approach requires close and particularized attention, just as with herding cats.

It also requires a hopeful approach, an approach I repeat every quarter in implementing principle number five, give my students really challenging material, including my own research, believing the more challenging the material, the more likely the student is to become engaged and grow. If I believe a cat will never learn to come when I call her, the cat will never learn that. In addition, if I believe a student is a "C" student, the student is more likely, one way or another, to become a "C" student. But if I believe every student can learn the material and fully expect each student to learn the material, they are more likely to believe this as well.

If my own unlikely epiphany and my secret cat-herding resource have taught me anything, it is to expect the unexpected uniqueness of and to be open to the possibilities for intellectual growth with each and every student.