

SUCCESSFUL
COLLEGE
TEACHING
BEGINS
WITH
AWAY
THROWING
YOUR
LECTURE
NOTES

ALSO BY
CALVIN LUTHER MARTIN, PhD



The Way of the Human Being
In the Spirit of the Earth
Keepers of the Game
The Great Forgetting
Eve's Breast

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*For Esther Wrightman,
Tina Graziano,
Joni Riggle,
Anne Britton,
and Sarah Laurie,
for boundless courage*



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P r e f a c e

**Professors are trained to be scholars,
not teachers. This is loony.**



MY LITTLE BROTHER just got his PhD and his first college teaching job. He's an expert in political science and knows almost nothing about teaching—and that, I tell you cheerfully, is typical of professors beginning their teaching careers.

If you're not a college professor this probably sounds crazy.

It is crazy, of course. But it's one of those charming traditions of our profession, along with tenure, academic freedom, and bizarre costumes at graduation ceremonies. What can one do about it? Some graduate programs now insist that their PhD students take a course in something they call "effective teaching," but this requirement seems

to be rare and not taken seriously. Plus, I have my doubts about some of the faculty teaching these courses. How well do they themselves teach? Faculty tend to be monumentally deluded about their classroom skills. Their students are the ones to ask, and many will tell you flat out that the professor is abysmal. Professors gripe about this, but the students are generally right.

I learned this when I became a student once again in one department while I was a tenured professor in another. Sitting in that multitude of anxious note-takers, and taking the course (biochemistry) for a grade, I was floored by the lousy teaching. I swore I would do something about it.

I overhauled my own teaching, and this book is the result. The impetus to write it actually came from my brother, who in a matter of weeks is going to march into his first classroom as Professor Martin — the Charge of the Light Brigade in slow motion. I'm afraid for him. Not that he's any less prepared than any other beginning assistant professor. I'm fearful for all of them. What these bright-eyed new PhDs know of their discipline (and they know plenty) is only half the story. Maybe only a quarter or even a tenth or less. The remainder, the huge part, is: How are they going to teach it to eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds? By "teach it" I don't mean so much what one writes on the syllabus,

or the books one chooses, or even the course content. I mean the conversation we casually call “teaching.”

Indeed, how does one teach at all? There are endless ways of teaching, of course, and just as many contexts. In this book, I’m addressing just one context, a common yet desperately neglected one: the realities of today’s college classroom. Not some long-dead image of my grandfather’s era at Princeton or Oxford or the state university, nor some equally irrelevant Hollywood fantasy about what it’s like to stand before a classroom, but the genuine thing from someone who lived by doing it and learned to love it. Although I started out hating it.

I write this book for my brother. As a primer. Something he might read in an evening or two. Something to save him, I hope, from the anguish I suffered and blunders I committed along the way.

I think of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* which many writers keep handy by their desk.¹ I would like to see this slim book take its place by Strunk and White. When you sign your first college teaching contract you will discover that you are expected to publish as well as grade

1. William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Macmillan, 1979).

student papers. Strunk and White comes in mighty handy. You will also discover, or maybe I should say you will be vividly reminded, that you are actually going to have to teach these students. Think carefully about this last bit of news.

The contract you are holding is calling you a teacher. But do you honestly know how to teach college students? Read this book before you walk through that door and discover you don't.

Chapter 1

**You stride into an utterly
silent classroom full of strangers.
It's like walking into a nightmare.**



I SHALL TELL you how to teach. I intend to be blunt, irreverent, and opinionated. Which is not to say I am cynical about teaching. On the contrary, I consider teaching to be a privilege and a sacrament.

I have lectured at Ivy League universities, state universities, small private colleges, even tiny private colleges, a microscopic Eskimo seminary (three faculty, twelve students), several state prisons, and a graveyard filled with hundreds of Indian children. The cemetery was at the old Carlisle (Pennsylvania) Indian Boarding School, the children were long dead, and this was their final class. But the prisoners were the best. New York City's finest. Many there for life, usually for murder. They were men—how shall I put it?—

that's because I was evangelical about what I taught and always flattered that anyone wanted to listen to me. So the more souls the better; I signed them in. I have had them sitting in the aisles and up front, backs to the blackboard, surrounding me. Since I was careful to get spacious rooms with windows, this never really bothered me. And, as I say, I believe the fire marshal is a hoax.

So pick your room carefully, realizing you may get more people than you expect. You can always go back to Scheduling and plead a larger enrollment and ask for another room, but by that point in the semester the pickin's are slim and unappealing. (Scheduling would always prefer to have you put a cap on your enrollment rather than hunt for a larger room at this stage in the term.)

By the end of my teaching career the enrollment in my lecture course was so huge I was using an auditorium rather than a regular classroom. There spelled the end of my beloved windows. At first I was able to open the side doors up front, letting in blessed air and light. But then some brilliant associate dean (or perhaps it was the mysterious fire marshal?) decided this was unsafe and these exit doors up front were fitted with an alarm and a sign, advising that this alarm would scream murder if this door were opened. I had a TA who was a brilliant electronics expert; he had

done highly classified things with trip wires and the like in the Vietnam War that he still wouldn't talk about. I hoped he could deactivate one of these alarms. He couldn't.

What he could do, however—and this is not trivial—was make certain the sound system worked in that auditorium. If ever you find yourself teaching in one of these cavernous chambers, believe me, you will want to make sure one of your TAs can bring a stubborn sound system to life. (Don't rely on the Audiovisual Department to send somebody over there. Think about it; Murphy's Law, which is *not* a fiction, was enunciated by a professor at a state university, I swear.) This guy was a genius.

When you contemplate teaching in an auditorium, think about your voice. You might imagine yourself blessed with lungs powerful enough to bellow to that sea of students for an entire period. You would be making a big mistake, however. It's utterly exhausting to shout (let's face it, this is what you are doing) for a whole period. Moreover, it comes across as precisely that: shouting. To shout is neither intimate nor compelling; you cripple your effectiveness when you must shout at people. Besides, you lose one of your strongest voices in public speaking: you lose silence. For silences (and they are essential to good teaching) are so exaggerated as to be startling in a shouting format.

Use a microphone.

As I say, I always visited my classrooms alone before I began teaching in them. Sit, walk around, meditate. Check to see if the student desks are comfortable. (Go ahead, try them.) Make sure there is a realistic table up front for you to put your stuff on and, yes, sit on. (Some tables are so beat up they're wobbly. Check it out.) Like an Aborigine, begin dreaming the class into existence, right here in this room where it will transpire. So when you walk in that first day, you are walking into a room that you know already and that knows you. Trust me, this familiarity will give you confidence.

I admit I do the same thing whenever I am asked to give a public speech. I tell my host I would like time alone in that room before the lecture. Or, if that's not possible, I ask to be taken to the auditorium plenty early, before the audience arrives. Try it. I call it equilibrating with the room.

Let's say you have adjusted to your room, equilibrated with it well before this first class meeting. And let's say you have been the first one to arrive in the classroom that first day—this too is important. You should arrive early, straighten the desks and chairs, pick up the soda bottles and candy wrappers, make sure the blinds are up, erase the board, wipe off the table up front (it's sticky with spilled soda or coffee),

and open windows. Make it a pleasant place for them when they arrive. This shows them you care about them.

You are now ready to meet your students.

The next point: get to know them. And they must get to know you. It is far more important to get to know each other on the first day or two than to lecture right away. In fact, I would say you are making a huge mistake if you lecture at this first meeting. Give them an overview of the course, yes, that's vital at this first meeting, but don't give a formal lecture. Remember: your students are actually shopping for courses this first week of the semester. Many are not solidly committed to sticking with your class. They are sizing up the course and the professor.

The classroom filled with young men and women sitting in front of you is nervous. Remember that. You, too, are nervous. It's important, right now, to think in small steps. Don't look out at them and think, "They are out there and I am here, at the front, and it's my obligation to teach them American colonial history or Economics 101 for the next sixteen weeks! Oh my God!" Forget about the course content for now. Right now it's time to meet one another. It's ancient human etiquette; it must not be ignored. And yet it is very frequently if not generally ignored by faculty,

even seasoned professors. To do so is almost to guarantee that teaching will be a drag for you, an onerous task rather than a delight.

But who are they, after all? This is a matter you will have to ponder long before the first class meeting. It is one of the most overlooked parts of teaching: *Who are these people?* The answer depends on your answer to a prior question, which is: *Who are you?* You are not teaching as a scholar or a professor. This is self-illusion. You are teaching as a human being. For this is how they will see you and this is how you will and must come across. Occupy the skin of a real human being and you will teach well; occupy the armor of a professor or scholar and you will teach poorly.

Chapter 2

**Idealism. Passion, compassion,
inspiration. It's wired into them.
This is a gift to you.**



YOUR STUDENTS ARE wonderful people. They are fascinating and often funny and always complicated, and some are cool, and they are all afraid. They are in a difficult transition. They are beginning to carry the burden of their future (many are putting themselves through college) and are apprehensive about the life before them. They realize the majors they choose now will have to funnel them into a job or further professional training. Plus they are getting considerable advice from parents to choose a practical (read: marketable) major. You will be astounded at how many want to go to law school for this reason alone—not because they are thrilled by what lawyers do (they barely know) but because they believe it is lucrative and prestigious. Lots are headed into

business for the same reasons, although they are less certain about the prestige and financial rewards. A smaller number are aiming for medical school, brimming with the idealism of a hospital soap opera. Medicine, alas, is not what they dream it is. Nor is being a lawyer or business person. (Nor is being a professor, for that matter.) Students generally have a romanticized picture of a particular career, which doesn't fit the reality of that career as you find it or witness it in your friends and relatives.

In short, the ones with a rigid idea of their professional goals are in for a shock. They are also the most difficult to teach because of their confounded single-mindedness; they tend to view a poem by Rilke or novel by Momaday² as entertainment, certainly not something serious and definitely not real. (I exaggerate here, for not all these people are so closed-minded.)

College is the place to take the intellect into realms one has never even dreamed of. This was my mandate as a professor, I believe. Yet the current thrust of college is to prepare students for a job. I have never been comfortable with this, in part because I never regarded what I did as a

2. N. Scott Momaday, Native American (Kiowa) novelist and poet who won a Pulitzer Prize for *House Made of Dawn* (1968).

job. Scholarship was my passion, my mistress; it would have been impossible to express the substance of that passion as a commodity. When a young man or woman came to my office and said cheerily, “Professor Martin, I’m majoring in history because I think it’s an ideal major to get me into law school,” I was wounded. This was a closed mind talking to me. There is nothing wrong with law school; what’s wrong is to make law school or any other career the driving force of one’s college experience.

College is its own purpose; it is not a professional program, nor is it a pre-professional or pre-career boot camp. The sad thing is that it has yielded to public pressure and allowed itself to become precisely that for many people. I feel strongly that college must be an end in itself, for in fact it is a unique experience. I found that those students who recognized this and embraced this uniqueness were easily the most engaging to teach.

Years ago my daughter, a high school dropout, decided to give college a try. She went to a large public university. Lindsey was working nearly full time. She had no particular career in mind, she just wanted to handle the kind of knowledge that a university traffics in. Her first semester she took a philosophy course. I sucked in my breath as we went over the reading list together. Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard,

Nietzsche, Camus: heavy going. On the other hand she was older than most college students; she had done some living already—some of it, well, bumpy.

Weeks later my wife and I visited and took her out to dinner. Lindsey told us she was staying up late into the wee hours reading Kierkegaard. Not for an assignment but because she adored his mind. His issues were hers as well, she said softly. A few weeks later, on another visit, she said as much about Sartre, whom she didn't adore but who challenged her mightily.

This is what you want in a student: the passion. Someone who can be moved. I always found myself happier with those students who were not at all certain of what lies ahead or, frankly, even their college major. The two worst things in a student are indifference and careerism; neither allows for the unexpected, the transformation, the shape-shifting that true knowledge creates in us.

I was once a visiting professor at a prestigious liberal arts college where the students were heavy partygoers by night and politely indifferent pupils by day. I barely made a dent in them and was glad to leave at the end of the term. On the other hand I found many of our PhD students at Rutgers intense but unteachable owing to their heavy careerist baggage. They entered the program knowing exactly

what they thought about everything; their minds were closed by the time they reached my seminar. I gave up teaching graduate students for that reason.

In general, too, students who are working to put themselves through college are much more interesting than those whose parents are paying the entire freight (oftentimes giving them fancy cars and expensive vacations, too). The latter tend to hold the material at arm's length; the former, seeing that life is a difficult proposition and that it is theirs to shape and not their parents', tend to embrace it.

Embracing it: this is what learning is about. It's not about being smart or dumb, gifted or not gifted; it's about being able to embrace the subject or not. It took me many years to figure this out, both as a student and as a professor. The people who can embrace it are the best students by far, regardless of IQ. This means that often your best students will be older, the ones coming to college for the first time in their later twenties, thirties, forties, or older. The ones who have done some living, especially if it's been a rocky road. Frequently they are the most unsure of themselves academically; they're afraid they don't have the background knowledge of their younger peers, afraid they don't have the note-taking and study skills, and they're afraid, often, that they are just plain not smart enough.

This is a laugh. Unless you teach at Yale or Harvard or Princeton, precious few of your students will have any background knowledge, in any subject, that's worth a damn. Every place I've taught, and it's been plenty, I always assumed I was talking to a blank slate—not to fools, but people who had virtually no substantial knowledge of what I was talking about. Experience proved me right. This dictum might be wrong in some of the sciences—I suspect it is. But in the social sciences and, especially, humanities, it almost invariably holds true. Older students have few worries here. Chances are, too, their study abilities and note-taking skills are superior to those of the great majority of eighteen- to twenty-year-olds.

Another thing, older students are usually much more passionate about the course and college in general; they are there not because of the momentum of high-school-on-to-college but because they have stepped off the treadmill of their lives and want to change their lives by going to college. They genuinely relish what they are doing in your classroom. And if they feel you are wasting their time, incidentally, they are the ones most likely to tell you. Be prepared for this, too.

Older students: in general they're great to teach. When you walk into the classroom that first day and spot one or two older students, you've been blessed.

I spend considerable time talking about the nature of students because teaching is largely an unspoken conversation between you and them. More than the course material is being discussed in this exchange; life, taxing and brilliant and mysterious as it is, is also being spoken, though silently. There are many college faculty who fail to understand this, who walk in, rattle off their stuff, get dusted up with chalk, pack up the briefcase at the bell (there is no bell, by the way), and start for the door, oblivious to the people in the room. I have seen this aplenty. It made me want to weep. I usually saw this performance in courses that were required of students, where faculty imagined they had a captive audience.

They are never a captive audience; students do you a courtesy when they enroll in your courses. I don't care if the class is required, it is still a courtesy.

Life is hard for many students. Though I am probably closer to the truth if I say it's hard for all students. Beneath the good looks, the jaunty manner, the polished repartee, often there is pain. You will be surprised by how many are taking Prozac, how many are fighting melancholia, how many are bulimic. By how many are having serious problems at home. What you are teaching is part of this, too; you cannot wave your arm and say these are not your concern. These young men and women are in your class carrying these issues and you delude yourself if you think

they can be expected, somehow, to lay them aside when they enter the classroom. In time, as they begin to trust you, they will visit your office and share these cares with you, if you're willing to listen.

I was willing. So I did a lot of listening in my office. Let me emphasize that they wanted me to listen. Not just someone—but me, if I was willing. As a professor you are someone they trust and even become fond of. You become a central figure in their lives, for the semester at any rate, and they are not soon to forget you. It is natural for them to want to talk to you about difficult things in their lives, and it is appropriate. They know you; they don't know the college counseling service. You can always urge those individuals with serious emotional problems to go to the counseling service or to get medical advice. For the most part what you will hear are the usual trials of growing up, trials that are real and really trying, and your sympathy and maturity in these matters can make a difference in their ability to cope.

Let students know that you think they are wonderful people. Give a speech about this at the first class meeting. Build them up. Speak at length of the difficulties of life and sympathize with their experiences. Tell them, too, that you

About the Author



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