

## Reflections on Being a Lasallian Educator

By

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*An essay in response to the question: How has teaching at Saint Mary's College shaped your vision as a teacher and influenced your pedagogy?*

I have been an educator for 25 years, beginning as a classroom teacher at an alternative school in Berkeley. My teaching career started with a creative writing course titled "Writing: Process and Product" for students in middle and high school. I designed an original curriculum that arose out of an interactive process with the students, in which I sought feedback from them and revised the course in response to my own perceptions of what was working well and the students' comments and reactions. At the time, I had not studied the philosophy of St. John Baptist de la Salle, and so I did not know that my own approach mirrored those principles in several important ways. I was naturally drawn toward creating an inclusive, accessible, student-centered classroom intended to cultivate critical thinking among students and lifelong learning for myself. It made sense to me that education should be practical and relevant, not ethereal, arbitrary, or intimidating. Even then, my orientation toward teaching was to be of service, to be genuine and connect with the students, and to help them engage in meaningful inquiry with themselves, with each other, and with the literature they were reading and the writing they were doing. I wanted them to be affected by the material, transformed by their own writing, moved by the work of their peers. I wanted them to perceive literature and poetry as applicable to their own lives. I approached my teaching with creativity and risk-taking—asking them to sit on the floor and play with clay and postcards, taking them outside to write about whatever they noticed, forming peer response groups so that I was not the only one evaluating their work. I grew as I learned how to play with the process and patiently wait for the product, to allow myself to revise an approach in the moment if what I was doing was not working, and always to be aware of the needs of the students. So, in many ways, the principles of Lasallian education were already in me. When I began teaching at Saint Mary's College, I knew immediately I was in the right place and that I would be able to do the teaching I wanted to do and to grow along the way.

My teaching has been shaped by many factors, and chief among them is the College Mission. The Mission resonated with me right away, because of my orientation toward service, my concern for social justice, and my love of liberal arts and learning. But when I first began to study the Mission in preparation for review during the tenure process, I felt baffled by the task of explaining what seemed to me to be "lofty ideals" such as probing "deeply the mystery of existence" and being "motivated by faith and zeal." Intuitively, I knew that these concepts mattered to me and reflected my teaching values, but I wanted to find a way to express my connection with them that would be concrete and tangible.

Connections between

theory and practice have become a thread in my scholarship, but started as almost a "bone of contention" for me as an undergraduate and doctoral student, when I felt frustrated by the fact that most of my professors seemed out of touch with the present day and unwilling to adapt or revise lectures that they had been delivering in the same way for years. I decided early on that I would always make an effort to maintain currency in my field, to be humble and open to new learning, and to push against the tide of burnout that can creep in when one is not exposed to new ideas or willing to be challenged to grow and change. This interplay between theory and practice eventually became a formal

part of my research agenda, and continues to support my professional health as I progress in my teaching career.

In addition to the Mission itself as a guiding force in the development of my vision as an educator, the process of writing the Form A during my pre-tenure years at Saint Mary's College was instrumental in helping me to formally define my teaching philosophy and to appreciate the connections between my teaching and Lasallian principles. Many people experience the tenure process as a grueling task to be dreaded and survived. For me, it was an intellectually challenging and stimulating period of time, in which I became more conscious about the reasons why Saint Mary's College had felt like a perfect fit for me from the beginning. I experienced the process as a dynamic interaction between me and my colleagues—and, most importantly, between me and my students as I thought more intentionally about my teaching and sought to improve my technique. This was a form of reflective practice in and of itself, something I value in my work and life, and something I appreciate about the culture of Saint Mary's College—that we are given time and space and support for reflection in order to mature as teachers and scholars. I have worked hard to nurture a scholarship agenda that is intrinsically connected to my teaching, and to discover new teaching practices through my own scholarly endeavors in return. The fact that all three strands of teaching, scholarship, and service are equally valued at Saint Mary's College has afforded me the freedom and support to pursue both enduring and new lines of inquiry during my career.

During my tenure review process, I outlined 10 principles that guide my teaching, in an effort to explicitly describe my understanding of the Mission in concrete terms. These principles continue to influence my practice and reinforce the impact of the Mission and the R&T process on my teaching. My guiding principles include the following:

**Be Student-Centered.** This is the most important teaching principle that I follow, and a key piece of Lasallian principles. Being student-centered means meeting students where they are, encouraging them to grow and develop internally and interpersonally, spending time together, listening to them, and getting to know them. Being student-centered means caring about students and dedicating time to them. It means laughing with them, hearing their life stories, and watching them evolve over time as professionals. It means that my work is indeed “motivated by faith and zeal.”

**Be Yourself.** Another key piece of my teaching philosophy is to be myself with my students. Students appreciate my honesty, my follow-through, my willingness to admit what I do not know and consult with others, and my sense of humor. I could not be myself with students if I felt unable to laugh with them or to encourage them to laugh.

**Be a Good Role Model.** Teaching is modeling, and in a counseling program, this manifests itself in some unique ways. Some general ethical guidelines in the field of counseling include displaying a “one-down” approach to de-emphasize power; using self-disclosure only when it would benefit the client or promote clarity; displaying genuineness, empathy and a nonjudgmental attitude; listening carefully, verbally and nonverbally; confronting clients by “surfacing discrepancies” in their behaviors to encourage growth and awareness; and, above all, always keeping the principle of “client welfare” in mind, which means preventing harm and promoting healing. These are only a few of the principles of ethical counseling practice, but they represent good examples of some of the modeling I engage in regularly in the classroom.

**Be Curious.** I am curious about my students and their interests. I want to know what is important to them, what they are uncertain about, and what they disagree with. I feel strongly about fostering a classroom climate where students feel confident that any question is worth asking. I am open to the idea that the students may discover issues that have not occurred to me and that these can inform the class curriculum.

**Be Organized.** It is important to have a good syllabus and solid materials to use in every class, and to be able to manage the class and the time spent on lectures and activities. I attempt to balance the need for structure in a class with the goal of allowing for unexpected topics or questions, and it takes good time management and classroom management skills to achieve this balance.

**Be Excited About What You Teach.** As I mentioned, I truly love my field of work and what I am able to achieve in it; I think it is important to convey my enthusiasm and “zeal” to my students, and I do this regularly in lectures and in the discussion questions I pose. I tell students how much I value counseling theory, for example, because it provides the “how” behind the “what” in our work. Being excited about what I teach means that I am self-motivated to remain current in my field, to increase my own knowledge and to update my class materials. My enthusiasm about the work I do helps me to make the class material accessible to students.

**Be Involved.** In order for me to be competent in my field, I must maintain awareness of current trends and issues. Reading professional journals, attending and presenting at conferences, and being involved in professional organizations are some of the ways I keep my teaching fresh and accurate. I am professionally and even personally enriched by my involvement in the greater counseling community.

**Be Flexible.** One way to be flexible is to be willing to be wrong or to have students disagree, and to handle this with openness, genuine curiosity, and humility. It is important to be flexible in methods of instruction in order to respect different learning styles. I use multiple approaches in all of my classes, and I vary the evaluation methods to correspond with the type of material being presented. With regard to teaching styles, I combine lecture, discussion, and activities in all of my courses.

**Be Clear.** It is important to be clear with students about expectations, instructions and directions, as well as learning goals and outcomes for each course. It is not enough to have these listed on the syllabus, though that is a given; these items must also be communicated to the students regularly and in verbal and written formats.

**Be of Service.** Service is an integral part of all three aspects of the Mission of the College, in that we are called upon to be of service to our students and to those less fortunate or in need. It is my job to be helpful to my students, to advise them on the practical aspects of meeting their graduation requirements and the larger issues that arise in graduate school. I am also committed to “demystifying the process” wherever possible. There is often little help in graduate school, as if the process of suffering through it alone is the only way to grow. This is not the case at Saint Mary’s College, and that is one more reason why I am especially pleased to teach here. We are known for going out of our way to support and care for our students, who are “given to (our) care by God,” as stated in the Mission. As I mentioned above, something I value about the experience of teaching at Saint Mary’s College is the encouragement and support for reflective practice. This has been a great source of satisfaction for me over the years, and has fostered within me a commitment to renewal in the form of regular course revision, a wide range of professional development activities that help me to maintain excitement about my teaching, and the willingness to be involved in designing new courses. I have a lively agenda of scholarly interests and pursuits that inspires and challenges me professionally, focusing primarily on professional development for counselors and school-based reform. I value time spent in reflection between semesters, that allows for inspiration to emerge in order for me to make a new connection, take a new risk, change something about a class, or begin a new scholarship project. Another primary factor that has shaped my identity as a Lasallian educator is the collaboration I have experienced and sought out with colleagues. I have collaborated with colleagues at Saint Mary’s College, in other educational institutions, and in community contexts, to submit proposals to present at professional conferences, on various writing and research projects, and in the development of new professional organizations and events within my field. I also engage in collaboration in the form of service as a faculty mentor to part-time and junior faculty members. Mentoring is both a strand of my scholarship and a personal commitment of mine. During my time at Saint Mary’s College, I have

mentored several full-time faculty and numerous part-time faculty with guidance on curriculum, consultation about student issues, assistance with professional development activities, and lots of encouragement and support. I grew up in a family that valued and regularly participated in service through volunteer work, charitable donations, and involvement in political campaigns. For me, working as an educator is a vocation, and I am drawn naturally to service.

The service component of working at Saint Mary's College informs and enhances my teaching in a number of ways. Within the Graduate Counseling Program (GCP), service helps me to have a clearer "curriculum map" for all of the courses offered across our specializations, so that when I am reevaluating my own courses, I can do so intentionally and strategically. Service within the Kalmanovitz School of Education (KSOE) encourages collaborations—such as the research poster presentations that my students make in the spring to K-12 teachers attending a professional development workshop—and broadens my identity as an educator. Service across the campus not only allows me to feel more connected to the College, but also permits me to utilize more of my skills and support my interests in social justice—for example, my training as a facilitator for Campus of Difference led to my involvement in the design of a special session in Spanish for staff, which allowed me to spend time speaking Spanish with key members on our campus about their perceptions of respect and diversity at Saint Mary's College.

In the wider community, my service activities have a tangible impact on my ability to remain current in my field and avoid the type of disconnection and burnout I had witnessed in some of my professors. I have been facilitating a group of school counselor alumni for 12 years, and I gain a lot of pertinent information about new trends in K-12 schools from the members of this group. In my most recent project, the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA), I have been involved in the creation of an international group of educators and the preparation for our inaugural conference, which will take place May 1-2 in San Francisco. It feels very congruent to me to work in a field that is service-oriented, and an institution that is also service-oriented.

Of course, the students themselves are probably the most important influence on the development of my teaching at Saint Mary's College, and my ability to internalize and live in the ideals of the Mission. Our graduate students vary in age and experience and have made a conscious decision to pursue studies in the field of counseling. Most enter graduate school with a lifetime of learning within a more passive "transmission model," so I am careful about what I tell them when it is my own opinion. I do not want to "shape" their opinions simply based upon my own; instead, I want to give them good, solid information from various sources and to cultivate within them the tools for actively engaging with the material. In this way, I attempt to model the aims and ideals of the College's Mission Statement by helping students "to probe deeply the mystery of existence by cultivating the ways of knowing and the arts of thinking," integrating fundamental principles on a personal and professional level. I love seeing students discover their own compelling areas of inquiry and become passionate about issues. I enjoy the freedom of working in an institution where the pursuit of truth and knowledge is honored and where I can offer a variety of perspectives to my students and expect a variety of perspectives from them as well.

I am passionate about raising awareness among students regarding justice, equality, and diversity in all its forms. I regularly engage students in dialogue and group discussions on these topics in every course—in formal assignments and "teachable moments" that emerge spontaneously. In return, students report that my courses are challenging and engaging. They state that I encourage them to learn and inspire them to think deeply, to take risks to express diverse points of view in class. They find me to be enthusiastic and passionate about the subject matter and able to make what could be "dry" material fun and interesting, so that they leave class wanting to learn more. Students say that they feel safe and supported in my classroom, that I am kind, open, patient, available, accessible, prompt, and

responsive—and that it is clear that I care about them. These are the values I hold dearest about being a teacher, and it is rewarding to see these values reflected in student responses about my teaching. My lived experience at Saint Mary's College since my part-time days in 1998 has helped me to formalize what I knew as a K-12 classroom teacher, to take the "lofty ideals" of the Mission and embody them concretely in my life as an educator. This is indeed the right place for me, and I am eager to learn more.