

Sid Bedingfield  
Teaching Narrative

When I arrived at the University of South Carolina as a doctoral student in 2007, I was a novice in the classroom. I had worked in daily journalism for more than 25 years, and I knew my experience could benefit journalism and mass communications students. Like many professionals who come to the classroom, I assumed experience and knowledge would be enough. I quickly learned that I was wrong. Fortunately, one of the first courses I took as a graduate student was a seminar on teaching mass communications. I came to understand that teaching at the university level is a craft that requires far more than mastery of the subject matter.

Since taking the class, I have taught seven different courses at the university level, and that experience has deepened my commitment to the concept of liberal arts education. I agree with educator Theodora Kalikow, who contends that a good liberal arts education produces students who are able to read, write, and speak persuasively; who have lithe minds that can analyze problems, imagine solutions, and move rapidly in new directions; who are skeptical of facile arguments, easy solutions, and simplistic analysis; who, perhaps most important of all, have a tolerance for ambiguity and complexity. I believe courses at the university level should challenge students to think critically and to question the accepted wisdom they bring with them into the classroom. This is especially important for prospective communications professionals. They are entering professional fields that are exploding with new opportunities, but only for those who are versatile and adaptable enough to take advantage of them.

The teacher's primary job, I believe, is to generate interest in the topic – to get students excited about the material and eager to engage with it, both in the classroom and on their own outside of it. You cannot light that fire in all of them, obviously, but generating that eagerness to learn should be the teacher's goal. Achieving it requires energy and enthusiasm in the classroom, and long hours of preparation beforehand. Students have shown through their performance that they appreciate consistency and rigor. They may not say so, but most want to be challenged. They want a syllabus that clearly defines the requirements in the course, and an instructor who adheres to those requirements – who sets high standards and helps students achieve them through frequent evaluation and feedback. Students know when the teacher is deeply engaged with the material and the course, and they generally respond in kind.

Students have helped me become a better teacher. I learned early on that a one-way mode of communication does not work. I am a strong believer in the concept of active learning. At the University of South Carolina, I took a workshop at the Center for Teaching Excellence that helped me develop strategies for creating student interaction in the classroom. I try to design teaching modules that elicit discussion and include in-class assignments that let students apply concepts they have been studying. At the University of Minnesota, I have adapted those strategies to work in larger classes. I assign students to groups of 12 or so, and during each class session one group is designated to be “front and center.” Students in that group know in advance that they will be expected to engage

in extended discussion about the day's material. In this way, even a large lecture class can include some of the depth and engagement of the seminar.

I frequently find that my research informs my teaching. In the summer of 2011, for example, I was selected as a National Endowment for the Humanities summer fellow at Harvard's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Studies. For five weeks, I read the historical literature of the African American freedom struggle and participated in discussions with scholars in the field. The experience deepened and broadened my understanding of African American history and contributed to my dissertation. When I returned to campus, I realized the experience at Harvard could transform my classroom work as well. With the support of the University of South Carolina administration, I developed a new course exploring the role of the mass media in the African American struggle for equality and cross-listed it with the African American Studies department. I have adapted the class for use at the University of Minnesota, and I have worked with the school's diversity outreach staff to ensure students of color are aware of it.