

September 2005 - Fr. James Loughran, S.J., President

I am not sure exactly how I got this assignment, perhaps I volunteered. Perhaps I was invited. Let's say it evolved out a conversation Fred Bonato and I were having about the "SPC Scholarly Guide," in my opinion, one of the best things at Saint Peter's College. Over the years I have found the "teaching tips" insightful and also very encouraging. We obviously have at Saint Peter's many people who care so much about their teaching and about the students being taught that they are constantly on the lookout for ways to improve. It is a good thing that these essays have been collected and are available for review, especially by new faculty. Here I shall offer not so much teaching tips as a few memories and reflections on my own experience in a college classroom.

In a presentation entitled "The Jesuit Ideal of a Teacher: A Complex and Developing Tradition," Gerald McCool, S.J. (who taught me metaphysics in the seminary and was my longtime colleague in the Philosophy Department at Fordham) said this: "Teaching in the ideal of Ignatius means stimulating self-activity and conveying *through personal influence* (emphasis added) the intellectual and moral values which have become the teacher's own. In the tradition of Saint Ignatius, there is something sacred about the work of teaching; it is a vocation, and a lofty one at that." In the same address McCool added this thought: "The Jesuit ideal of education" views "the school as a *community of personal influence*" (emphasis added). I recognize myself in those words. That is how I was trained namely, to regard teaching as extremely important and classroom time as sacred, always to remember that I am teaching alongside fellow teachers within an academic community.

A *sine qua non* of successful teaching is preparation. To be outstanding, teachers must spend significant time in preparation, with their flesh-and-blood students in mind, of course. I once had that conviction put in question. While spending a year as a visiting scholar at Johns Hopkins, I attended the seminars of Jerome Schneewynd on the history of moral philosophy. He was as good a teacher as I ever had. Having assigned many pages of reading for every session, he would come to the table carrying armfuls of books. He would get right into it - - making a few comments, asking questions, responding to student questions and comments, reaching for one of the books he had brought and quickly finding what he wanted to cite. He did it all effortlessly, with complete mastery and insight after insight regarding the texts. We became friends and have stayed in touch. Several years later I told him how I marveled at the ease with which he handled those philosophical texts and how he must have reached that point by having taught those authors for so many years. He laughed and said: "Jim, I bet I spent an average of twenty hours preparing for each of those classes." I was relieved!

A teacher can spend hours and hours preparing, so that the classroom performance is brilliant. But, if the students are not prepared or, worse, are not there, how can that teacher possibly be successful? I always told my classes that I did not have a chance to be a good teacher for them unless they showed up and showed up prepared. I told

them flat out that absences were not permitted, that I would be there for every class and expected them to be there as well, that this class was an academic community whose quality depended on one another's commitment and effort. I promised them that they could count on me and told them that I wanted to be able to count on them. I did several other things to "motivate" my students. At the end of every class I would introduce the reading for the next class. I would give a very short quiz on the reading at the start of class which anyone who read the text with normal concentration could "ace." I would return the graded quizzes at the end of the next class. The quizzes normally had a value of ten points with two points for the student's own name. When I had twelve of these quizzes, I would add up the grades so that, for a diligent student, it was possible to score more than one hundred. Anything over ninety was an A. Thus, as you can see, it was a certain amount of forgiveness built into my system. I also assigned papers and gave exams, but the quiz grades were usually one-third of the final grade.

I have a good high school and college friend who used to come in from Long Island to Fordham for a monthly half-court basketball competition I organized. Once he arrived very early, and I invited him to sit in on one of my classes. We were analyzing some philosophical text or other which he hadn't read, and I noticed him restless and distracted. Some years later, during my year back to teaching at John Carroll University, he came out for a visit and stayed in the Jesuit community for a few days. I invited him to class again and gave him ahead of time a copy of the text we would be discussing. After the class he commented, "you are much better teacher now than you were back at Fordham." "That's because you prepared," I exclaimed.

One final story. Back in April I received a note from an adjunct Theology teacher at our Englewood Cliffs campus asking that I do his citation for his *Bene Merenti* medal this year. Here is part of what he wrote: "In 1977, ...I met with you at Fordham...Not knowing anything about Philosophy, I was very worried as to whether I would fare well with these courses....You helped me to see the important of philosophical training... Whenever anyone asks me about how I got my start in teaching in the Theology Department at Saint Peter's or the Religious Studies Department at Marist College, I always give you the credit for turning me on to Philosophy in that first course. ... Knowing how *influential* (emphasis added) you have been in my life, I cannot think of anyone I would rather speak for me on the occasion of twenty years of service to Saint Peter's College."

I barely remember this former student, but, as fellow teachers will appreciate, I am deeply pleased. Teaching is "a vocation; and a lofty one at that."