

**2002-2003**

***Brierley Lecture***

***on***

***College Teaching***

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**"Some Intellectual Influences on My Teaching:**

**Confessions of an Unruly Professor"**

Delivered

March 11, 2003

**Center For Teaching Excellence**

**11 Brook Way**

**University of New Hampshire**

**Durham, NH 03824**

**"Some Intellectual Influences on My Teaching:**

**Confessions of an Unruly Professor"**

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I would like to open my lecture with several important preliminary remarks. First, thanks to one and all for taking part in this annual celebration of teaching. Also, I would like to thank David Hiley and Lee Seidel for sponsoring this festive event and for their advocacy of teaching excellence at UNH. Finally, I want to acknowledge the breadth of teaching excellence at this university. It is an honor to present this lecture on behalf of all of those UNH faculty who are deeply committed to the craft of teaching.

Selecting an overarching theme for this presentation was not easy for me. I don't presume to be an expert on pedagogy. When I became a graduate teaching assistant several decades ago, I was thrown into the classroom with almost no formal training as a teacher. Whatever skills I have acquired as an educator since then are the result of years of trial and error, sometimes at the expense of my students. I envy today's doctoral students at UNH; they have more opportunities to learn about effective teaching methods than I had when I launched my own academic career.

And yet, there is more to teaching excellence than a firm grasp of pedagogical method. The effective professor has a passion for understanding the world and a commitment to sharing insights with others. This afternoon, I would like to acknowledge some of the people who have exerted a decisive influence on my teaching career by equipping me with intellectual capital. I hope that you will find my reflections interesting and perhaps useful.

The first person I would like to name is Professor Noam Chomsky. As a doctoral student at the University of Michigan, I happened to encounter his 1966 essay on "The Responsibility of Intellectuals." The U.S. invasion of Vietnam prompted Chomsky to write this essay. In it, he reflected upon an earlier essay by Dwight Macdonald, in which Macdonald had examined the culpability of, not just the German and Japanese people, but also the British and American people in the cruelties and atrocities of the Second World War.

There is a key passage in Chomsky's essay that helped to form my own approach to both scholarship and teaching. He claimed,

"Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions ...

For a privileged minority [within academia], Western

democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and training to see the truth lying behind the veil of distortion ... through which the events of current history are presented to us ...." [1, p. 60]

After reading this passage, I inferred that the purpose of my graduate education was not to gain speedy admission to the fraternity of professional economists but rather to acquire and hone skills with which to critically examine economic theories, political ideologies, social conditions and public policies. (In retrospect, I need to thank the economics faculty in Ann Arbor for tolerating my slow progress through their doctoral program.)

Several decades of experience have taught me that discovery of truths obscured by "the veil of distortion" is more difficult than Chomsky's essay seemed to suggest. As I have aged, I have also acquired a greater appreciation for intellectual humility. At the same time, however, I believe that the need to "expose the lies of governments" is just as pressing today, perhaps more so, as it was in 1966.

A second formative influence on my intellectual development was Kenneth E. Boulding. He was a British import to American academia; a student of chemistry, accounting and theology in addition to economics; a convert to the Society of Friends during his days at Oxford; and a fascinating lecturer despite a severe stutter. I first encountered Boulding in his graduate seminar on conflict resolution during 1967.

Professor Boulding taught me several important lessons. The first was the need to question the intellectual barriers that result from an ever-finer academic division of labor. Reflecting upon his own career just before his death, Boulding remarked,

" ... I became convinced that if one were going to study any particular segment of the real world ... one had to do this with the skills not only of the economist, but of the sociologist, the political scientist, the anthropologist, and even the philosopher and the theologian." [2, p. 75]

This commitment to a multidisciplinary perspective that I learned from Kenneth Boulding helps to explain why I have taught a freshman honors seminar on the history of science and why I have participated in the peace studies minor and natural resources doctoral program. It also explains my firm belief that we fail to serve undergraduate students when we train future professors within the narrow confines of highly specialized academic disciplines.

Another influence of Professor Boulding is that he affirmed and legitimized my own reason for having entered graduate school. Quoting Boulding once again,

"If my life philosophy can be summed up in a sentence,  
it is that I believe that there is such a thing as human  
betterment ... and I think human decisions should be  
judged by the extent to which they promote it." [2, p. 83]

This utilitarian sentiment encouraged me to remain in graduate school, despite some reservations, and to resist the positivist dichotomy between "objective" and "normative" economics that dominated 20<sup>th</sup> century economics in the U.S.

Still another influence on my intellectual development was Professor Joan Robinson, of Cambridge University. She was a leading economic theorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a vigorous debater, and a pioneering woman in the top rank of academic economics.

Robinson insisted upon the importance of achieving conceptual and methodological clarity before launching into mathematical and statistical analyses. She is remembered for raising tough questions about what we mean by "capital" and how we should measure it. She also pointed out that the economist's use of the equilibrium concept to construct theoretical arguments usually relies upon a "metaphor based on space to explain a process which takes place in time." [3, p. 255] During my teaching career, I have tried to convey the importance of conceptual clarity to my students, undergraduate and graduate alike.

Joan Robinson also furnished me with a fundamentally important question, one that has guided my research and teaching for many years. Writing in 1977, she asked,

"What is the object of production in a modern industrial  
nation, and if we could have more of it ... , what

should we use it for?" [ 4, p. 32]

The last quarter century has confirmed the central importance of her question. Satisfying the basic needs of all members of humanity while simultaneously preserving the natural systems upon which humanity depends is the most basic challenge we face during the decades to come.

This point brings me to still another academic who has decisively influenced my development as a teacher -- Professor Amartya Sen, recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics. Sen has pursued a cosmopolitan career at various elite universities in India, Britain and the United States. His earlier writings on economic theory did not hold much of an attraction for me. It was his 1981 book on the social origins of hunger and famine that grabbed my attention.

In that book, Professor Sen offered several detailed case studies of famines in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and the Sahel region of western Africa. Those case studies revealed that an unequal distribution of wealth and income, inadequate transfers from government and charities, and the operations of a free market in foodstuffs result in the lethal vulnerability of certain social groups.

Sen begins his book with a stunningly simple and restrained, yet powerful passage:

"Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat ... In order to understand starvation, it is ... necessary to go into the structure of ownership." [5, p. 1]

This stark comment is somewhat deceptive because Sen's writings offer us a rather complex view of economic philosophy. He has insisted upon the importance of respecting individual liberty and valuing economic efficiency but also the need to foster the human development of all. This perspective leads one, I think, to a more balanced view of markets than economic textbooks normally provide. I have tried to convey this point of view to my own students.

By now, you can see that there has been a long chain of influences upon how I perform in the classroom. I would like to illustrate those influences by commenting

on my view of urban housing markets. It is notable that nearly all economists are hostile to the municipal rent control laws that have existed in New York, Boston, Paris and other cities. That hostility is grounded in the theoretical prediction that rent control laws cause shortages of apartments and also deter private construction of new housing. There is, I think, truth in those predictions. Many textbooks for freshman students of economics conclude that rent control laws should be repealed so that market forces can allocate housing without legal restraint.

During the past decade, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has performed a natural experiment for us by actually repealing rent control in Boston and Cambridge. There have been a number of consequences of decontrol of apartment rents in the Boston area. I would like to focus upon one of those consequences, the recent death of Mr. Robert Gurney.

After graduating from high school, Mr. Gurney served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War. Upon returning to Boston after his military service, he was employed in a variety of manual jobs and lived in the same South End apartment for thirty years. According to his recent obituary,

"About a year ago, ... Mr. Gurney was forced out of  
[his apartment] ... The landlord renovated the  
building, rents went up, and he was evicted." [6]

After his eviction, he lived for a time in a homeless shelter and then in a shack with several other homeless men underneath the Southeast Expressway. He subsisted in part on food donations from construction workers employed on the Big Dig project. This past January, he died from a combination of asthma, heart and liver ailments, and severe cold weather. After his death, the federal government provided assistance in the form of burial in a veterans' cemetery on Cape Cod.

What would Professors Chomsky, Boulding, Robinson and Sen make of this story? I suspect they would agree with me that the operation of a free market for housing, just like a free market for rice in Bangladesh, can have deadly consequences for some members of society. I believe that it is imperative that students of economics be introduced to this dark side of market economies and that they ponder what we can do, as a citizenry, to prevent social outcomes of the sort I have described. This imperative is especially strong during an era of market deregulation, welfare reform, cuts in taxation and public expenditure, and globalization of economic activity.

And now for my conclusion, a stanza from a poem attributed to my teacher, Kenneth Boulding:

"Guard the ground well, for it belongs to God.  
Root out the hateful and the bitter weed,  
And from the harvest of thy Heart's good seed  
The hungry shall be fed, the naked clad,  
And love's infection, leaven-like, shall spread  
Till all creation feeds from heavenly bread." [7]