

Teaching Outside the Classroom:  
Making a Difference in Students' Lives

Lecture to the Center for Teaching and Learning  
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Let me begin by thanking the Center for Teaching and Learning for inviting me to join you here today, and by wishing you all a Happy Halloween. I suspect you appreciate my decision not to wear my superman costume today, which in any case no longer fits me.

The last time I wore that thing was in the mid-1970s. I remember that time for another reason. I had just started the Ph.D. program here at Stanford. And the campus was seized with the issue of teaching quality, after some popular teachers had been denied tenure, one of the most popular opted to leave the university even with tenure, and there was a general sense that teaching was not adequately valued by Stanford. The founding of the Center for Teaching and Learning in 1975, and the gradual expansion of its mission and scope of work under the extremely able leadership of Michele Marinovich over these many years, would prove to be seminal developments in the life to Stanford University, and its maturation into a truly great university. It needs to be underscored again and again that no college and university can be great unless it is great at teaching, and this requires a continual ongoing process of training, refreshing, renewing, evaluating, and learning ourselves as teachers (including from our students) how to become more effective teachers.

I want to address today the dimensions of teaching that lie outside the classroom and even outside the context of courses and formal instruction. But before I get there, let me stress that the core of the educational experience is classroom teaching (both in lectures and seminars) and it is vital that we do as good and inspiring a job of that as possible. A couple of years after

the Center for Teaching and Learning was established, the ASSU appointed a Task Force to examine the relationship between tenure and teaching quality. I was asked to chair that Task Force, and it included such great Stanford teachers and scholars as Don Kennedy, Allan Cox, and Bill Rivers. After studying the issue for most of a year, we came to the conclusion and unanimously recommended that improving the quality of teaching required a comprehensive structure of knowledge and incentives. It's not enough to have a Center like this, teachers (faculty and graduate students) have to want to make use of it, and to spend more time becoming good and better teachers. The most important result of our work was the recommendation, adopted by the Faculty Senate, that every Stanford course be required to be evaluated by students (using a standardized format whenever possible) every time it is offered. Such student course evaluations (along with other sources of information we proposed, including retrospective evaluations), we felt, was vital to improving teaching and also to rewarding teaching. Not long thereafter, the Dean of Humanities and Sciences established the Dean's teaching awards to add to the incentive structure.

Before I move on I would just like to add two additional points. The first is that if we are going to be as good as we can be at teaching, we have to diffuse information and consciousness about our teaching as widely as possible, and this requires in part public access to course evaluations. For me this is also a moral issue as much as a bureaucratic one: When students are paying several thousands of dollars for each course, and when the opportunity costs of taking one course over another are so high, they have a right to the information, through the vehicle of their own student course guide. Second, we still need to do more to reward and retain outstanding teachers. It became clear to me before long that a great university like Stanford was never going to award tenure to a great teacher if he or she had a poor record of scholarship and publication.

And faculty should always be encouraged to integrate their teaching and research, and to make excellence in one drive and inspire excellence in the other. But the fact is that some faculty, when they become tenured, bear unusually large loads of teaching and advising, and come to make an unusually large difference in students' educations and lives, inside and outside the classroom. I still don't think we do enough to reward these truly gifted teachers with, among other things, permanent salary increases, beyond just one-time forms of recognition. We need to think about that.

Now, what can we do, and do better, to teach outside the classroom, and thereby make more of a positive difference in students' lives?

I want to discuss several aspects of this challenge. They fall into three groups. One is purely academic, involving individual instruction, through directed reading or research and especially supervision of honor's theses. A second involves bridging academics and the real world, by helping students to find opportunities to study overseas (and learn through traveling) and to find service learning internships. And the third is more personal, advising them on their next steps and future careers.

Let me say a few general words about all of these forms of engagement with students outside the context of a class and classroom. First of all, this is teaching at the micro, retail level, and it is very time consuming. I will come back to this problem again, and again. Students need time individually, to be heard, to be read, to be advised, to be engaged and helped. But for most faculty members, time is a scarce and precious commodity. Part of this involves setting priorities. And part of it involves setting limits on how advisees one can realistically give quality time to. There is also the need to think about the purpose of the meeting with the student, and to leave enough time to address the purpose. If the meeting is to update progress on the honor's

thesis and hand back a chapter that needs only minor revisions, 20 minutes might be enough. But if hard thinking is needed about the structure and scope of a project as big as an honor's thesis, or about where the student is headed in life, more time is going to be needed. There is nothing more discouraging for a student than finally getting to see a professor about something important that they want to talk about, and then realizing that the meeting is under the tyranny of a rapidly ticking clock. Some necessary meetings with students can be accomplished in 15 minutes and some need an hour.

The most important thing I can say about engaging students outside the classroom is that it's not about us as professors, it's about them. There are times when students come to office hours because they want to hear more about the professor thinks or does. But the first key to being a good advisor is to be a good listener. A good listener has to be focused, patient, and when necessary, probing. Being focused means giving the student all of your attention. Phone calls should be taken very sparingly, at most. Interruptions should be minimized. The student in front of you needs and deserves your complete attention. And they need to be given a chance to say what is on their mind, what they are excited about, what they are struggling with. This requires patience on the part of the listener, but also a readiness to probe and stimulate the conversation. One of the most common types of conversations I have with students comes when they start thinking of what they are going to do after they graduate. The possibilities seem bewildering and daunting. In fact, they can be paralyzing. Students are very often confused. Do they want to go to graduate school, and for a Ph.D. or an M.A.? Should they do some kind of service first? Should they work? Travel? For how long? Where?

They want our advice. But a good advisor needs to be cautious and to bear in mind, it's not about us, it's about them. The challenge is not to turn the student before us into an image of

ourselves, but to help them become what they have a passion and a gift to be, and to help them understand what that might be, to draw it out and to put forth a range of possibilities. In advising, I rarely say, “You should do X.” Rather, it is better and more appropriate to say: Here are your options. You could go to graduate school right away, but do you really want to do that? Do you feel you need some time off? What about service, the Peace Corps, Teach for America, or some other way of giving back to a community for a time while learning in a different way, from direct engagement with people? What about working in government, a civic organization, a consulting firm? The best way to advise is to get the student to see the range of possibilities, and the possible consequences and implications of each option for their own personal and professional growth. They have to be the one to decide, and they have to be excited about the course they are embarked on. The two most important questions I can ask when advising a student are: What are you excited about? And where do you want to be in ten or twenty years, what can you envision yourself doing? If a student can work forward from the basic question of what excites and inspires them, and backward from the question of what they would like to be doing by the age of 35 or 40, then an advisor can better help them to understand the range of possibilities.

The problem is that some students really don't have any idea of how to answer that question, and that requires working forward from the first question, what excites them and appeals to them, what do they love doing and engaging? I do not have any magical solutions to this problem, except patience and persistence. Often this the type of conversation that has to unfold over an extended period of time, with several meetings and long stretches where the student thinks about possibilities and tries things out. Then there are the students who can answer the question of where they want to be in ten or twenty years perhaps too precisely and

ambitiously. Sometimes there is value in encouraging students to take some time and NOT be in so much of a hurry—that they don't have to be, and probably won't be, the youngest this or that in American history, and that they will wind up being better at what they do if they come to it from a diversity of life experiences. But then there are the students who are clearly ready for the next step and pretty much all that is necessary is to write them the letter of recommendation they deserve.

### **Writing Recommendations**

Part of teaching outside the classroom is helping students get the fellowships, internships, overseas studies opportunities, graduate school admission, and jobs they want. That means writing letters of recommendation, and possibly lots of them over a long period of time. Every professor finds his or her own method for managing this serious responsibility. I'll just say something about what I've learned from the process, after many years of having asked for recommendations, written them, and also read them. A really good recommendation has to say more than that the student got a grade of A, wrote smart essays, and spoke intelligently in class. It should give the reader a sense of the student beyond what can be grasped from the transcript and even from the student's own statement of purpose. This requires a lengthy conversation, maybe more than one, to inform the recommender: What has the student done outside the classroom (and in other classrooms) that drives her or him to want this fellowship, study opportunity, grant, job, or academic program? How does it relate to her broader programs of study or her longer-term career aspirations? I have a standard mode of procedure in writing recommendations. I want to see everything: the description of the job or fellowship or whatever they are applying for, the student's statement of purpose, their academic transcript, and their

resume. Then I want to meet with the student and know what lies behind the things they did on the resume, what is their passion, their ambition, the link between they are applying for and what they want to do with their life. Letters of recommendation are often one of the most important items in a file, because they can give a sense of the student's personal qualities that cannot otherwise be grasped, and because a faculty or staff recommender has more scope (and often more space) to convey the student's qualities than the student himself can do in the statement of purpose. Usually I get to know students better in the process of writing their letters of recommendation, and I endeavor to learn things about the student and what makes them special that the selection committee would not be likely to know or grasp from the rest of the file.

### **Honor's Thesis Advising**

I have found one of the most meaningful and rewarding forms of teaching at the undergraduate level to be advising on honor's theses. In the programs I work with, in International Relations, Political Science, and the Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, we have developed effective seminars for helping honor's students to develop thesis proposals and then structure, write, and present their theses. These seminars, where students learn what is involved intellectually and logistically as well as ethically in doing original social science research, are indispensable in shaping responsible and high-quality research projects and products. But they are no substitute for close supervision and active engagement with a faculty advisor. The advising process has to begin at the beginning, with motivation. I try to make clear to the student that the thesis is a major undertaking, the writing of which will consume much of their senior year, and they need to have a strong personal and intellectual commitment (as well as adequate time) to see it through. I try to make sure it is something they

want to do and are excited about, rather than something they feel they need to do in order to check another box. Sometimes I discover that the student wants to have the experience of writing an extended original research paper, but either doesn't have the time or will to do something on the scale of a senior honor's thesis, or doesn't have the grade point average to qualify for honors. In these circumstances, there are other options to be considered. The student can write a very good and meaningful research paper on a more limited scale, say over the course of one quarter (or two) rather than three. I have been happy to work with students and give them credit for independent research in this way. And there is no reason why a student who doesn't qualify for honors can't do original research and write what amounts to a senior thesis. The key is that it has to be something they are doing because they care about it, are turned on by the subject, not because they "need" to do it.

Once a student is committed to and excited about a topic, they need a research plan. For my students, this generally involves going abroad to do research, usually in the summer after the junior year (sometimes even beginning with research and internships the previous summer). So planning ahead is essential. For an IR student who wants to do a thesis on a foreign country or international problem, planning needs to begin by early in junior year, because the student needs to do a fair amount of preparatory research and background reading to scope out the problem, structure a research question, and prepare a grant proposal. Then we need to think about how interviews are going to be done and materials collected, what are the techniques and again the ethics of interviewing people, particularly on sensitive subjects. How can we gather information and learn in a way that does not endanger people or intrude unduly on their privacy and time. What can we give back in return? Well, in part, the research itself.

When the student returns, the initial task is to take stock of the research over the summer? Has the problem changed in some way as a result of the research? What will be the plan for distilling the interview material and other information collected? Is there any way of coding it statistically that would be meaningful? What new reading, theoretically and comparatively as well as about the case, does the student now need to do in light of the data gathered and the evolution of the research agenda?

Then, there needs to be a timetable for writing. I always ask my students to walk back from the due date. Everyone wants in principle to be considered for a thesis award, so the due date they have to have in mind is early May. They need to allow for slippage, things they can't anticipate: It may take longer to write up one chapter than they anticipated. Another class may demand more than they could have imagined. They might get sick. So I have them draw up an outline of the thesis and then a timetable for completing each chapter that allows for some slippage due to unforeseen circumstances along the way. And then we have to keep reviewing that agenda and timetable to make sure they are on course and that it is realistic. In this way, the thesis becomes not just a long paper but a valuable exercise in personal discipline, of learning how to manage time and create something substantial.

I also go over the writing with the student carefully. The thesis should be more than an intellectual or research exercise; it should also be a process of learning to write more cogently, succinctly, and engagingly. I encourage the student to begin the thesis with a story, or some powerful example or narrative that draws the reader in. I mark up their chapters and encourage them to pay attention to the writing style as well as the substance of what they are conveying. And I encourage them to think about publishing some version of it at some point, either in a

journal or even a book (which is what Jared Cohen did with his senior honor's thesis on the Rwandan genocide).

Finally, I don't think there is any harm in planting the idea for a senior honor's thesis early on in the mind of a student who clearly has the gift and ambition to do something original and outstanding. My experience has been that the earlier a student starts thinking about a possible topic, the better prospect they have weaving together academic and summer activities into something unique and ambitious. Sometimes a summer internship or an overseas studies opportunity one year can provide the initial introduction to a country or problem that can generate a great research proposal for the following summer. Students should be encouraged to think about or be alert to these kinds of linkages.

### **Internships and Fellowships**

I am convinced that one of the most important ways our students can learn outside the classroom is through public service, and I have a great admiration for the work of the Haas Center, through its various community and public service fellowships and through the Stanford in Government program locally, nationally, and internationally. There are many more students who would like fellowships, particularly internationally, than we can provide, and I hope we can expand the range of offerings in future years.

I try to make students aware of these fellowship and internship opportunities, and to look for new ones. But I also try to start, again, from what the student cares about and wants to do, and look for opportunities. Helping often means making connections, putting students in touch with new possibilities abroad, introducing them to foreign visitors and fellows, and then helping them to find the money to get abroad. Again, I want to start with the student: what does she care

about, what is her passion or fascination, how can she extend and push herself and make her study and work speak to her values and aspirations. What might be the connection between the research or internship she might do next summer and the career she might have in ten or twenty years?

### **Caring about the Student as a Person**

I have up until this point talked about how we as faculty and staff can help our extraordinary students find and avail themselves of a wide range of exciting opportunities, and how we can help steer them to realize their ambitions and dreams. Much of the advising and assistance I offer is at a pretty heady level of possibility, pushing out from the present in tantalizing ways. But sometimes the challenge students confront is just getting through the day, the week, the quarter.

Tom Friedman recently called these students generation Q, quietly going about the challenge of changing the world and building their careers in individual and incremental ways. I think there is truth in that and more to what they are doing than that, but I also have another term for the students of this era: Generation Stressed. We have to come to grips with this better than we have been doing. The competition to get into Stanford and then to excel while here is more intense than it has ever been. There are more demands, higher expectations, and more stress on students coming into Stanford and getting through Stanford than I have seen in previous generations, going back to my first year here, as a freshman in 1969. We have to be alert to this, to the signs of excessive stress, discouragement, and depression, other psychological maladies that are quite treatable but can become quite debilitating without early recognition and intervention. Why has a student stopped coming to class? Why has she not turned in her paper

or exam? Why is he always falling asleep in class? Well the answer could be they are just partying too hard, or not committed enough. But in this day and age, it is more likely to be serious depression or sleep deprivation from overcommitment.

A good teacher has to be proactive here. We have to find out why the student is not performing, and the quarter is short, so we can't wait several weeks to figure out why someone has disappeared from the radar screen. Faculty need to take the initiative to alert and interact with residence staff, the Dean of Students office, the registrar's office and other dimensions of the university to develop a team approach, and a sympathetic and supportive set of options, for a student who is having serious difficulty. We need to educate ourselves to the opportunities available for counseling at the Vaden Health Center or peer counseling at the Bridge, and other forms of support. I find it useful to ask students who seem to be having trouble what is going on with their life and to give them the opportunity to unload, if they are ready to do so, to come clean, and to ask for help—or to explain that they are getting help, and to ask for an incomplete or other arrangement. I never want to encourage tardiness or procrastination, but the fact is that the quarter system is brutal, the pace of life at Stanford can be crushing, and we need to give students having trouble a chance to breathe, to recover and re-equilibrate without fear of failing. We need to convey that this is not abnormal, that lots of people are in a similar situation, and that there is nothing—nothing—that is more important than their physical and psychological health and well-being. Really, grades pale in comparison, but since grades are a major source of stress, we should try not to hold them hostage to a crisis in a student's health.

This leads me to conclude on a mundane and indeed drowsy subject, sleep. My biggest concern about our students, generically, is that they are not getting enough sleep, and I know this is a big reason why they struggle a lot through the quarter, physically and mentally. We all need

to do more to stress the importance of this, and to keep our expectations (and I would add, our work assignments) in line with reasonable expectations. I ask students to consider whether they aren't taking on too much, whether they really want to and can handle 20 units, whether they need to be in such a hurry. I occasionally have to tell a student that it is okay to just take 15 units and set aside some time to enjoy life (something I could not have imagined having to advise a student a generation ago).

The problem, unfortunately, is not just one for the students. It is one that I am struggling with myself and for which I have not found a good answer. It is a deeply structural problem, and I can reduce it to this example. Making a difference in students' lives is time-consuming. They need time to be heard and time to counsel them. Time to read their papers and emails. Time to write them letters, and to search for new opportunities that fit their needs and aspirations. Time to engage them and to get to know them as people. But one can only devote so much time to do this without losing time from writing, from policy work, from classroom teaching—from all the other things that makes students want to engage the professor in the first place. And what often gives, yes for the professors, too, is sleep. This is not a sustainable solution.

I think there is no absolute solution to this problem. We strive for excellence, strive to give and be of service, but must come to understand that sustaining this for the long run means striking a reasonable balance between competing demands, and involving as many colleagues and peers as possible in work with a given student, so that teaching outside the classroom becomes the collective enterprise, the cooperative effort, the conscious ongoing endeavor and the series of happy by-products that distinguish a great university or college from a merely good one.