

Fifteen lessons from nine years of teaching

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On the first day of my college classes, I tell students that we will treat each other fairly and with kindness. I expect class discussions to be guided by a spirit of mutual respect and generosity. They don't know the backstory. Decades ago, in a Manhattan workshop, a

fellow-student I thought was my friend turned outright cruel, declaring that a poem I wrote "was completely worthless". I was too intimidated to speak up, and the instructor didn't rope in the comment appropriately. Although three students came up to me after class to let me know they disagreed, it took me years to get over that workshop, which was so full of animus that most of the new students didn't return.

Since then, I have become a professor myself, and I'm in my tenth year of teaching. I have taught at four colleges and also had the privilege of being a writer-in-residence with InsideOut Literary Arts Project (iO), which brings working poets into Detroit public schools, so there were years where it wasn't uncommon for me to teach elementary, middle, high school, *and* college. (That was as exhausting, and satisfying, as anything I've ever done.) Currently, I'm on staff at both Oakland Community College (OCC), where I teach writing, and Lawrence Technological University (LTU), where I teach the classics.

It excites me to see students captivated by language. Early on, I share with them my belief that excellent speaking and writing skills should help them earn 20% more in whatever field they enter (unless, of course, they become adjuncts, which I do not mention). A plumber who wants to do business with large companies needs to be able to write a grammatically correct proposal letter for a contract, and if he can't, he probably won't get the

work, even if he's the best plumber around. I tell the story about a former student who was on a job interview and, impulsively, corrected the grammar of the interviewer, the head of a small company. Immediately, she apologized. And she was hired. Why? Because her future boss saw that she had the potential to make him look good.

My teaching is intensely personal, and personal trauma is the wellhead of it, although I do not share this with my students; however, I do address trauma and its effects through the literature we study. The students have no clue that one of my brothers was a heroin addict who relapsed after being clean 13 years then shot himself in the head – unless of course, they have stumbled upon my writing or Googled me and found my website. They also don't know how shut down and ashamed my family was of both his heroin use and ensuing suicide; the family requested an open casket – who would do such a thing? – and the undertaker skillfully hid evidence of the exit wound, so no one would know how he died. I often think shame killed my brother as much as his illness. Because of my familial history of trauma, I weave into my lectures the toxicity of shame as it relates to mental illness and addiction, often using examples from our texts. I'm grateful for the many times students have shared their painful challenges, and I have been able to guide them toward appropriate help.

It has been more than 30 years since that New York City workshop and over 17 years since my brother's violent death. Experience tells me that even though my adjunct salary may not fully reflect it, my teaching has value. So, **Lesson 1: Kindness reigns.**

I also let students know I'm interested in them. The first day I ask them to complete a form that includes what they want to do after college, who their favourite

teachers have been and why, as well as anything else they want me to know about them (if it's confidential, I note that). Using this information, I can let them know who has similar career goals *and* this form also gives a sample of their writing (an easy reference for their level of proficiency and for detecting plagiarism). **Lesson 2: Find out about them first and have them write it down.**

Before I could succeed as a teacher in the community college, I had to learn the students' mindset. At first, I was shocked that they knew all about the latest royal wedding or the Kardashians but hadn't heard of Emmett Till. Fortunately, OCC gives me a wide tent under which to teach, which allows me to infuse the teaching of language skills with a healthy dose of political passion. I stress the importance of understanding varying views, even those with which you don't agree.

I spent three of my years with InsideOut at Henry Ford Academy, an elementary and middle school in Highland Park, a beleaguered city bordering Detroit, which exposed me to students whose primary goals included surviving poverty and violence. I wondered where the arts fit in. I discovered that exposing young people to poetry and fiction was a way to shine a light on some of their greatest resources. **Lesson 3: In neighbourhoods where incomes are lowest, the arts are needed most.** Otherwise, students might never learn to express themselves creatively and constructively. This learning can be life-saving – a ticket out of drugs, crime, and gangs. Younger students are more resilient – but working with the older kids can bring even more satisfaction. (My essay on time spent there is included in the anthology *To Light a Fire* [Frenkel 2015]).

At Henry Ford Academy, I became friends with Patricia Arnell, the school's principal. Patricia was born in Brooklyn, New York. We bonded immediately because I'd lived in New York and she was pleased to see a white, Jewish woman in a school that, as she liked to put it, "lacked diversity." Patricia recalled her three childhood best friends from public school: Julia Santiago, Rosemary Nu, and Harriet Berkowitz. Harriet had numbers tattooed on her forearm, and Patricia was jealous of them; she wanted a tattoo. Later, when she discovered what those numbers were for, she was appalled at her ignorance. Today she has a string of ivy-and-roses tattooed around an ankle. **Lesson 4: Telling stories in class is an essential part of teaching. And a little humour doesn't hurt.**

At LTU in Southfield, Michigan, I teach my favorite class, World Masterpieces II, which encompasses literature and art from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. When discussing the importance of titles, I quote a 1983 headline from the *New York Post*: "Headless Body Found in Topless Bar" (Musetto 1983). To sell students on the power of concision, I recite the six-word story (often attributed, without substantiation, to Hemingway): "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." Both examples *always* leave an impression.

LTU is looking for students who "think outside the box." One spring, after the students had read numerous pieces of literature, I put two columns on their final exam, listing various names on each side. I asked them to pair the couples, assuming they would focus on romantic entanglements. Instead, one student got the answers all wrong, pairing people I thought did not belong together. He was a bright, serious student who contributed well to class discussions so I was baffled and called him back to the classroom to go over the answers. His logic was fascinating and delighted me. He linked seemingly disparate characters together through observing their character traits: two were withholding, two were obsessed with the past, and so on. I then asked him to pair up characters as romantic couples, and he immediately gave me the "correct" answers. He earned full credit for his nontraditional thinking, which is just what LTU looks for.

In World Masterpieces II, we begin with *Frankenstein* (Shelley 1998), and then we move on to *A Doll's House* (Ibsen 1879). While lecturing on *Frankenstein* last fall, I noticed one student doodling furiously. When I approached her, I saw she was working on a stellar portrait of the monster himself. Doodling can help concentration, I noted aloud, then praised the student, asking permission to show the other students her drawing; they were equally in awe. Delighted, I offered extra credit to anyone who wanted to draw characters we are studying. Two students drew remarkable portraits of Frankenstein and one also created an amazing portrait of Nora as a marionette. I show students that artwork and the extra credit assignment remains in place today. It's been a joy to marry their passions within the parameters of the course. **Lesson 5: Utilize students' talents to engage them and the class.** Discussing the lives of the authors captures students' attention and helps put work in context. When teaching *Frankenstein*, I talk about the Shelleys (and Mary

Wollstonecraft Shelley's parents), as well as Byron. This introduces topics such as suicide, feminism, drug use, extra-marital affairs – topics not so different from what they watch on TV. After *A Doll's House*, we read a few short stories or plays by the Russians (this semester Tolstoy and Chekhov), then cross the ocean for Faulkner's horror story of how Miss Emily Grierson's hair ended up on a pillow (1930). Once in the deep South, we stay to read Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" (1971) – and I show relevant art, including work by the painter Chuck Close and the sculptor Duane Hanson.

Close's meticulous paintings may seem a stretch from Southern Gothic fiction, yet both employ a kind of photorealism: keen seeing makes good fiction, as shown by the description of Mrs. Freeman's face in the opening of O'Connor's story.

Throughout the syllabus, I mix-and-match disciplines so students are exposed to **Lesson 6: What at first may seem a bit scattered begins to coalesce into a broader, deeper understanding when you look more closely.**

One goal is to get students to dig into the arts on their own, so class time is interspersed with their PowerPoint presentations, which I pre-approve, then supplement with some teacherly additions. The topics range from Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" (1984) to Motown (we are in Metro Detroit) to the life and times of Pablo Picasso. For the latter, I did a quick run through the birth of Modernism, linking Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" (1917), which is an actual urinal, to Claus Oldenburg's "Soft Toilet" (1966). We then looked at Duchamp's painting "Nude Descending a Staircase" (1912) and read X.J. Kennedy's poem with the same title written more than 70 years later (Kennedy 1985).

Such rapid-fire time-travel is exhilarating both for students and teacher. We study poets dead and alive; one favorite is Molly Peacock, a mentor of mine, who writes accessible sonnets. She also wrote *The Paper Garden* (2010), a biography of Mary Delany, an 18th century British woman who, in her 70s, invented the art form known as collage and produced nearly a thousand beautifully and botanically precise paper flowers that now reside in the British Museum. Mary Delany embodies my **Lesson 7: It's never too late – your life's work has no set timetable.**

After looking at images of Delany's flowers, we read Marianne Moore's poem "Silence" (1967), which mentions the gorgeous glass flowers at Harvard. Then we pivot to collages by Matisse. I use the same connect-the-dot method with photography; Lewis Hine's conscience-rousing pictures of child labour are matched with Robert Pinsky's poem "Shirt" (1989) about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. One of my favorite poems is Tony Harrison's "Long Distance II" (2006) and that is especially wonderful coupled with a brief visit to Raymond Brigg's graphic novel *Ethel & Ernest* (1998). In a culture that emphasizes material wealth, both of these works hone in on that timeless lesson, whose origins come from Judaism: Who is rich? He who is happy with what he has. There is no better lesson than gratitude.

Lesson 8: Practise gratitude.

I like showing how art and design may enhance a life and bring ease to sore spirits. After reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we move to Galway Kinnell's poem "Shelley" (2004). After reading *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf 1925), students see images of architecture related to Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury, including Monk's House and Charleston – and, before that, we discuss William Morris. (Discussing Woolf is an easy segue to speaking about mental health, too.) As for William Morris, they know his patterns even if they don't know his name. I like to think that his famous quote, "Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful" (1880), relates to their school work, too – after all, that should be the litmus test for the written word as well.

Most of all, I like it when students discover how using language appropriately can make a difference for them and their communities, how they can become passionate about turning something ordinary, or something ugly, even brutal, into something of beauty, as Marilyn Nelson did in *A Wreath For Emmett Till* (2005). And this is how we are transported to a whole world of ideas – not in a grain of sand, but in a classroom with fluorescent lighting.

Students also visit the Holocaust Memorial Center (HMC) in Farmington Hills, Michigan, the first in the country dedicated to the Holocaust and the only one where survivors speak. Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer-Prize winning *Maus* books (1986-91) are required reading at LTU; these "graphic novels" are nonfiction with

anthropomorphic characters; the Jews are mice, the Nazis are cats, and the Americans are dogs. Based on Spiegelman's interviews with his father, a Holocaust survivor, they also reflect his mother's life; she, too, was a survivor and died by suicide when Art was merely 20. To add to that horror, Art's only brother was poisoned by his aunt in Europe when the Nazis were en route to capturing them. In reading this experiential memoir, students feel immersed in the real-life nightmare.

Speaking to his psychiatrist, himself a Holocaust survivor, the author says that, despite hearing about life in the concentration camps from his father, he can't truly comprehend it. Just then, his doctor screams "Boo!" and startles him. I literally jumped in my seat when I read that scene. That's what it was like all the time, his doctor continues; one never knew what was around the corner. For my students, visiting the HMC brings the *Maus* books into a greater historical context. Hearing a survivor speak after the tour widens their lesson even more and shows them that, to quote Faulkner, "The past is never really dead. In fact, it's not even past" (1951). This brings me to **Lesson 9: Expand their empathy through literature based on history.**

When we discuss Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in class, I explain that, after one is terrorized, life feels eerily precarious and frightening because the brain has rewired itself to be on the lookout for imminent danger. I mention Septimus Smith and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988), and, how walking through the woods in the American South, one could stumble across a body dangling from a tree, how hundreds of individuals were never reported missing because the authorities would have done nothing to solve the crime of lynching; indeed, they were likely party to it. Sethe, the main character, felt ashamed after thinking about how beautiful the sycamore trees could be; then, she remembered that they were the instruments of execution, where boys had been lynched. And we also talk about how we're still experiencing the toxic aftereffects of slavery and the Jim Crow era.

Since the topics are heady, I make room, too, for digressions by not planning my time too tightly. Important lessons emerge unexpectedly. **Lesson 10: Be flexible in the classroom so when an important topic arises unplanned, that teaching moment can be utilized.** In doing so, teaching becomes an activity where the learning exchanges are mutually enriching,

infused with an element of surprise. This was the case recently when a student presented on the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, who died in 1977 of a heroin overdose at the tender age of 27. In 2017, a 1982 Basquiat painting broke the record at auction for an American painting: \$110.5 million (Pogrebin and Reyburn 2017).

Making this the subject of an impromptu lesson, I expressed my disdain for recreational drug use. I added that addiction is an illness, as is depression, noting that if someone is depressed, you're supposed to ask if they are suicidal and, if they say yes, get them help right away. (If they say maybe, or give an indefinite no, such as "not really," that is considered a yes.)

Perspective from other people's lives helps here, even if those lives are fictitious. We had already read about Ivan Ilyich's vacuous existence and met the power-hungry Dr Frankenstein, so the Basquiat painting became the basis for a wide-ranging discussion about moral values.

We talked about the last part of *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993), when Oscar Schindler begs someone to buy a diamond-encrusted pin because, by selling it, he can buy (and save) a life. "What is wrong when a painting sells for this kind of money and the artist is dead at 27?" **Lesson 11: Nothing, absolutely nothing, is as valuable as you are.**

Dr Richard Mollica, who wrote *Healing Invisible Wounds* (2006) about his work with Cambodian victims of the Khmer Rouge, documents the healing power of storytelling. Just being heard is validating; in being heard, one can feel seen. These are the seeds of healing: we are not alone. Such things are real. Such experiences matter.

I am fortunate to be able to bring other connections to the classroom, including the work of writers I have known, like Molly Peacock. I am always amazed at her grace, candour, humour, and wisdom. Recently, I went with my friend Dawn, a fellow poet, to meet Molly for dinner with a few others before she gave a talk about Mary Delany, as well as her newest book, *The Analyst* (2017). En route to Dawn's house, I got lost and spent an hour driving on the streets of Detroit. With the help of OnStar (a navigational system with a human on the other end), I got back on track, but not without passing through neighbourhoods increasingly in shambles, a landscape of run-down homes that served as a reflection

of how much work still needs to be done.

It was a sad reminder of many of my students' predicaments. Of course, this isn't limited to the metro Detroit area – people live in poverty in many places worldwide. How can we have an educational system that doesn't serve whole populations? My heart is heavy wondering how society, so rich in resources, can treat our children, our most valuable resource, with such indifference.

What can I give them? Poetry is rich currency. When I took a graduate class in the late 1980s with the Russian-born poet Joseph Brodsky, he told us that if we didn't know poems by heart then we didn't really know them. Here was a man imprisoned in Russia for writing poetry. So at LTU, I have my students (who can hardly imagine a society without free speech) memorize poems. They are marked down if a comma or semi-colon is out of place because they have been taught that one single punctuation mark can completely change the meaning of a line. In writing out the poems, they draw on a well of memory. How was this line created? How does the rhythm work? Where does the stanza break? What is the meaning of this turn of phrase? They become better listeners and observers. I believe looking more closely reinforces the underlying connections between politics and art. **Lesson No. 12: Appreciate the privilege of free speech. Use it.**

One more friend and mentor whom I give a shout-out to in class is Dr Glenda Price, who was president of Marygrove College, a Detroit university. She moved to Detroit for that job, taking a pay cut for the chance to make a difference here. That's the mark of a life well-lived and what we need more of: rewards measured out by what one has accomplished rather than the paycheck one receives.

Even though I can grow resentful at how little I earn teaching, especially compared to well-paid celebrities who dominate the media, I deeply value my work as an adjunct, although I wish it were full-time employment.

Sometimes in class, I'll mention the "celebrities" I truly admire. At Oakland Community College, for a class in which I cover the Civil Rights Movement, my first required textbook included Martin Luther King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" (1963), my favourite piece of persuasive writing from the 20th Century. Even at his

darkest hour King understood the importance of keeping open the lines of communication. The first four words of his "Letter" set his inclusive tone: "My Dear Fellow Clergymen." That is how change is best made. That is the power of kindness or, as King called it "the weapon of love". **Lesson 13: When disagreements arise, nothing is more important than maintaining dialogue.**

Years before I thought about teaching, I had the honour of interviewing Rosa Parks for an online magazine; we wound up spending five hours together. This amazing afternoon confirmed my hunch: Mrs Parks made history not merely because she stood up to hate, but because she did so with grace, kindness, and dignity.

What happens when we treat our students with kindness? Many rise to the occasion. Educators can emulate Mrs Parks. It also affirms **Lesson 14: Love is the most powerful emotion and it is embodied in simple acts of kindness.**

Even now, at 59, I recall the extraordinary delight of teachers whose kindness and investment in me changed the trajectory of my life. I think of two high school teachers: Lolly Hazard, a Southern woman whose love of Southern literature infuses my teaching today, and Robert Steele, who not only believed in my writing, but gave his students forms with categories listed on them in which to rate our writing before turning it in (headings included Clarity, Conciseness, etc.). I think back, too, on numerous other teachers, among them enormously talented writers, who extended themselves in ways indicative of truly-invested educators. Fully present in the classroom – and during creative writing workshops, the focus was *our* work – their delight was palpable. I still remember, for example, the late writer Harry Mathews, a beloved teacher I had at Vermont's Bennington College in what seems like a lifetime ago, laughing so hard that tears were streaming down his face when I read something aloud meant to be zany. His approval felt like I hit the lottery and that belief in me countered my own doubts, when my internal voice repeated negative messages. We kept in touch for years after.

This brings me to my last lesson, which has to do with the influence of a single teacher, who can serve as a moral compass as those teachers of mine I reference here; each was a small, constant light of goodness, juxtaposed against a world often both confusing and

overwhelming, and sometimes mired in corruption. Students need to know they have agency in their lives, and the tools learned in school will strengthen their lives. Teachers are the ones who can light up subjects with conviction, and affirm day in and day out that students count. **Lesson 15: Teachers can inspire subtle but powerful revolutions.**

Though not a teacher in the classroom, Marjorie “Mo” Mowlam is another woman I’ve admired ever since her name was in headlines all over Europe when I was visiting years ago. Because it was her personal charisma and reputation for plain speaking that helped seal the historic Good Friday agreement bringing peace to Northern Ireland in 1998, the power of her work remains. I get special pleasure in sharing her story with my students, who have likely never heard of her or her work. Such public figures are refreshing; Mowlam’s disdain for pretense and delight in humour helped affirm her universal appeal of one individual’s good will and quirkiness. It also highlights the underlining importance of our own uniqueness while celebrating our commonality, without spelling either of those things out.

Most days I love teaching, although I cannot pretend that everything is always hunky-dory, and that I never get an indifferent student or two. Just today, I gave a student a warning for texting during class. Sometimes, too, being an adjunct feels like an uphill battle. Invariably, my outlook improves when I’m in the classroom, excited to be with my students as we learn together. I encourage my students to love what they do. I tell them that they are the next generation of leaders. I assure them that literature heals, teaching literature is a privilege, and reading is their gateway, an ideal way to travel in time, and to experience other lives. And then, I go home to grade papers.

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