

Question 1:
Over your teaching career, what is the most valuable lesson your students have taught you?

“Students have taught me that while I may understand communication concepts and theory, I may not understand how that theory works or fails to work in the lives of my students. This became particularly clear to me when I was teaching an interpersonal class on the subject of perception checking. We were talking about the usefulness of checking perceptions and ways that it might be done. I offered examples from my own experience and a student of color raised his hand and said, in essence, if I did that your way I would be ridiculed or worse. I suspect he would have been seen as ‘selling out.’ I was only smart enough to acknowledge that it might be up to each of us to figure out how to use the concept of perception checking within our own cultural group or peer community. It was a great reminder that while as academics we may think we know things, we must be constantly aware of how context influences communication.”

David Bodary, Sinclair Community College
2015 Michael and Suzanne Osborn Community College Outstanding Educator Award

“A few years ago, one of my former students was the speaker at a college foundation event. She spoke passionately about a number of the classes she had taken at the college and the professors that she had admired. When she mentioned me, she said, ‘and thank you Professor Willets for teaching me that I really *don’t* know everything, like I thought I did.’ I had to laugh, because that’s exactly what I have learned from my students. As a young professor right out of graduate school, I thought I had learned it all. It didn’t take long for me to realize that I still had much to learn. Slowly, I released my grip on having students do things ‘my way—aka, the right way’ and learned to ask questions that allowed them to think and explore, not to simply read my mind and respond with what I wanted to hear. It also opened the door for them to be far more creative and to revel in their own discoveries. So now, decades later, I tell my students that the greatest thing about teaching is how much I learn every semester. That if I just stay open-minded, that if I allow them to show me that there are other ways to think, to do, to create, I just might learn something. And the more years I teach, the more I embrace that lesson.”

Nancy Willets, Cape Cod Community College
2014 Michael and Suzanne Osborn Community College Outstanding Educator Award

“The most valuable lesson my students have taught me is the necessity of determining the particular learning styles of students with whom I am not successfully communicating and adapting to those learning styles either in the classroom as a whole or in individual conferences. A student in an Advanced Placement English Literature class participated quite effectively in class discussion providing accurate support for interesting and sometimes oblique insights that other students did not bring forward. When I assigned the first in depth written analysis of the work we had just completed

reading and discussing, I eagerly looked forward to what the students would express in their writing. This particular student did not meet my expectations, and, even though we met and discussed the work, I still did not comprehend adequately what she was saying in her paper. Finally, a light bulb went off. I was not open to her somewhat unorthodox, but legitimate, approach to conveying her ideas. Her way of learning, which she conveyed in her papers, differed so dramatically from my method of learning and expression of that learning that I had to sit back and read her work in a different way. We both worked hard at reaching agreement, and I clearly saw necessity of using facilitative language in all class discussion and of being aware that students express their ideas clearly and precisely from the place of learning they inhabit.”

Jean Ann Streiff, Oakland Catholic High School (Pittsburgh, PA)
2006 Marcella E. Oberle Award for Outstanding Teaching in Grades K-12

“The most valuable lesson my students have taught me is to never set a limit or ceiling on what a student can accomplish. Even though a standardized test score, high school or college GPA, financial hardship, or a significant personal challenge might suggest that a student will struggle in college or even drop out of college without finishing their degree, I have seen many students reach their dreams and goals that initially seemed farfetched and out of reach to their family members, friends, peers, and professors. Early on in my teaching career I was too skeptical when I met with students to discuss their futures. I encouraged students to identify what I thought were realistic and attainable dreams and goals, because I was concerned that students would be disappointed if they were not able to achieve what they ultimately wanted to accomplish (e.g., publish in an NCA journal as an undergraduate student, earn a prestigious graduate school fellowship, be the first in their family to earn a degree and work at their dream Fortune 500 company). Now I have adjusted my approach and have worked to help students identify intermediate dreams and goals that will help them accomplish their ultimate dreams and goals. Once students are able to identify ways that they can make the most of their college experiences both inside and outside the classroom, anything is possible for them if they are willing to put in the hard work and effort needed to accomplish their dreams and goals.”

Tiffany R. Wang, University of Montevallo
2017 CSCA Outstanding New Teacher Award

“Reflecting back on my teaching career, I would say one of the most valuable lessons my students taught me was the importance of listening—listening to what they say and also listening to what they don’t say. As we teach our students, good listening is a very confirming act because it shows others we value and respect them. This is true in our interpersonal relationships but needless to say, also in the classroom. Years ago, when I was in my doctoral program, I supervised student teachers for the university. I was observing a student teacher one day and she went up and down the rows of students asking them to respond to a question she gave them. Each student responded yet she never once responded to anything any of the students said. After the class, I asked her

why she hadn't responded to any of the comments made by the students. She said she wouldn't know what to say to them. I told her that if she listened carefully to what each student said, she would absolutely know how to respond. In addition, perhaps she would then be able to engage the other students in more of a discussion than simply a question and response activity. I believe that when we listen to our students, we understand them more clearly and we are able to ascertain what they know, what they don't know and how to truly engage them in the classroom. As I indicated in the first sentence, even listening to what they 'don't say' informs us and helps us know the direction the class needs to take. Perhaps I understood the importance of listening because it is something the communication discipline stresses or maybe it was more intuitive, however, I know it has helped me in the classroom over the years and I believe my students helped to teach me this valuable lesson."

Sara Chudnovsky Weintraub, Regis College
2014 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award

"Students are people too. They have stresses, other priorities, families and friends that need their attention, work obligations, financial problems, and time management issues. Not everyone has a perfect, privileged life in which they can dedicate every moment to their studies. Students are students because they are in process of learning something about the world, whether it is public speaking or high level rhetorical theory or something else. Many teachers and professors feel personally affronted by those who plagiarize, fall asleep or use social media in class, turn in poorly prepared and/or late assignments, make comments or discussion points with which we do not agree, and challenge our sense of authority. I hear so many professors complain that the students do not read the syllabus. But they are often taking five classes, with five different sets of policies on paper submissions, deadlines, writing preferences and styles, and so forth. We have to remember that students are facing a lot of challenges. If we can take a moment to understand their perspective, we might better connect with and teach our students. They are learning ways to navigate their lives, not just the content of the course. Time management, communication skills, critical thinking, and relational ability are processes that take a lifetime to learn. We should not expect perfection from ourselves, so we surely should not expect it from our students."

Stacey K. Sowards, The University of Texas at El Paso
2013 WSCA Distinguished Teaching Award

"The most valuable lesson I have learned is that students are persons first, students second. What I mean by this is that one needs to recognize them as persons with issues that impinge on their lives as students. A first-year student who arrives in college and then learns that his parents are filing for divorce is not going to be focused as much on class-based work. A student who is experiencing a break-up or is worried about finances or . . . and the list goes on with respect to the multiple ways in which their lives outside academe intersects with their lives within the classroom. Recognizing their role as persons also means understanding that not all students will perform at the same

level, but this does not diminish their importance as persons worthy of respect and admiration. I used to tell the story in class about a former student who proclaimed ‘2.0 and go’--what he meant was that he was quite comfortable passing and moving on. I had no worries about his skill level or his potential in later life, and his subsequent success verified my impression. Grades are not the only measure of a person’s potential.”

Raymie E. McKerrow (Emeritus), Ohio University
2017 Wallace A. Bacon Lifetime Teaching Excellent Award

“My students have taught me that granting them the power to make choices and exert ownership over their educational experience can produce deep learning. When students have agency about their assignments, topics, structures, deadlines, and even rubrics, they, with mentorship, can create meaningful learning experiences that merge their unique goals and interests with course material and learning objectives. The resulting videos and podcasts, publications and conference papers, community dialogues and service-learning projects powerfully demonstrate how communication research, theory, and skills impact their personal, professional, and community lives. Making this shift towards a more learner-centered approach has been a long time in the making in my career and is not without its challenges, but I grow increasingly confident that it can be transformative--when I take the time and effort to establish clear structures and guidelines.”

Lisa Keränen, University of Colorado Denver
2015 WSCA Distinguished Teaching Award
