

A TEACHER'S JOURNEY BACK TO THE CLASSROOM

THE PERFUME OF CHALKDUST

BY MARGARET WINCHELL MILLER

After a 20-year sabbatical, I returned to teaching last January.

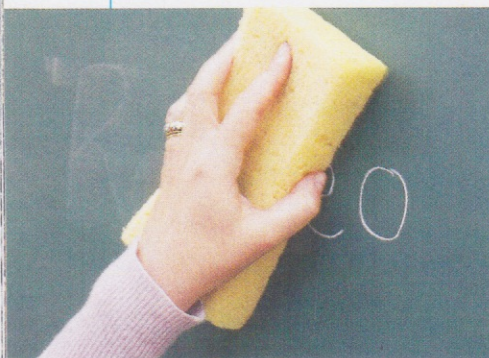
Houston Community College needed an adjunct professor in the English department to teach expository writing—and I missed the classroom the way a chef misses his kitchen. What I learned was that no matter how high-tech our world becomes, some things never change. ¶ On the first evening of class, I opened the door to an empty room and the familiar perfume of disinfectant and chalk dust. One by one the students arrived, eyeing me and my lesson plans with reservation. I'd forgotten how the first class of the semester is like a blind date—everyone taking mental notes, making judgments, students and teacher each wondering, What have I gotten myself into here? John likes to be called Chad... Pablo goes by Adrian... I took notes as I called roll. We reviewed the textbook and syllabus, and as I passed out copies of an article I'd written (establishing my credentials and proving that good writing skills are, in fact, a useful tool in the “real world”), I felt my confidence returning: Ah, yes... they've come here to learn what I already know how to do.

It was during the third week of class, just as I was settling into a rhythm, that a reality of the new millennium set in. A colleague in the elevator, noting the armload of work I was taking home to correct, recommended that I be on the lookout for suspiciously well-written papers on abortion, cloning, gun control, and other social issues, all popular topics in an expository writing class. At www.duenow.com (and dozens of similar sites), a mere \$19.95 a month buys “access to over 30,000 high quality essays and term papers,” traded on the Internet as openly as used clothing. Ah, plagiarism. I’d almost forgotten.

But the Internet offered legitimate shortcuts as well. Reading the essays, I found that students could

theme music on a commercial plugging Beef—It’s What’s for Dinner! Alice Walker’s essay on beauty and self-image inspires moving compositions on the subject. (Each class, students write for 10 minutes, nonstop, before we begin discussions.) Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” generates thoughtful debates on civil disobedience and prejudice in a room filled with students of every ethnicity. Laziness? Plagiarism? Not on my watch.

A few students didn’t make the cut. One attempted to take the class entirely online, turning in essays and excuses each week by e-mail until I had to remind her that this was not a correspondence course. Another arrived 30 minutes late for each class and failed to turn in any work. But the



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and did write research papers without ever having to leave home. Web sites were referenced more frequently than any other source—sometimes exclusively. After grading the first set of papers, I scheduled a session in the college library, in which most of my students had never set foot. “Is it cheating to use only Internet sources?” a student asked. “No,” I said. “It’s just lazy.”

Laziness—and its corollary, plagiarism—is nothing new and a teacher’s biggest foe. When I was in high school, a student’s chief temptation was CliffsNotes. They were like drugs. Students who used them knew to keep quiet about it. Now they’re available online, providing yet another shortcut for busy students who don’t have the time or inclination to read the real thing.

Still, the real thing is what my students have signed up for and what I’m there to present. We translate Thomas Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration of Independence into today’s language. After discussing Aaron Copland’s essay “How We Listen,” I play a recording of his spirited “Rodeo,” which everyone instantly identifies as the

majority got what they paid for. We read. They wrote. I taught. We learned.

One student attached a note to her final exam: *It really was a pleasure for me to have had you as a teacher. I enjoyed every comment you gave to all of my essays. I know I have a lot to learn but you took me halfway. Thank you.*—Judith. But it was her postscript that tempted me to return for another semester—despite the low pay, bad hours, and long commute: *P.S. Keep up the good work.*

There’s an old saying that those who can—do. And those who can’t... Well, you know the rest. My philosophy is that teachers aren’t at the bottom of the corporate ladder giving everyone a hand up, but at the top, reaching down to help those who need some instruction to get where they want to go. I’m back in the company of those who teach. And I have to say—it feels good. ■

Texas-based writer Margaret Winchell Miller recently wrote and co-produced a 13-week series for Houston Public Television. For more information, visit www.superwomancentral.com.