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EDUC4343

Interview with Teachers

I’m sitting down for a visit with Dr. Wood, a veteran teacher of over 39 years. He has taught in private and public education, in Secondary and Higher Ed. Dr. Wood is of the impression that students do their best when they are held to high standards and expectations. He is a self-professed “generalist” when it comes to his personal interests. He said he can direct a band, lead a choir, teach an upper-level graduate math class and program a computer. His experience with Computer Science classrooms is what led me to seek him out.
Not far into the interview, we’re joined ad hoc by Dr. Luft a colleague of Dr. Wood’s that shares his experiences too.

***Tommy Gober:*** Thanks for seeing me.

***Dr. Wood:*** Thanks for meeting me here.

***TG:*** I know you’re time is short, but I wanted to see how much information you can squeeze into our brief time together. I know you’ve been teaching for a long time, and that’s one reason I came to you, tell me, how long *have* you been teaching?

***Wood:*** I would guess 39 years when you consider my time both as a full time teacher, grad assistant and professor.

***TG:*** 39 years. Wow, that’s quite a while. Can you recall any specific example of a student that really gave you problems? Who was your most challenging student?

***Wood:*** Most challenging… *pauses and looks out the window for a moment*. I’d have to guess I’ve had about 8 or 9 students that really stick out in my mind. I can’t recall any student truly shaking me to my foundation as much as they did keep me on my toes. One case in particular, he wasn’t so much *bad* as he was *advanced*. You know in programming, you either know it or you don’t. Usually I have the “don’t’s” in class – he was one of the “do’s”. He knew his stuff, boy.
When you’re going along with your lesson, he’d stop me to correct me. (Chuckles.) He was right, I had made a small error, but the frustrating thing was that it would break my stride. Constantly having someone nitpick your work as you’re marching along is tough. And you know, he was *always* right – even when he wasn’t.

***TG:*** So a pride thing?

***Wood:*** Definitely a pride thing. I may have been teaching the same material for over 5 or 6 years. I know what the test was about, but here he comes to tell me my answer C is not worded correctly and that he deserves credit for the question. I’ve taught Computer Science in several languages…

***TG:*** …the logic is the same, but the language “has been changed to protect the innocent”?

***Wood:*** Right, and he wasn’t having any of it. He missed the question fair and square, but he wouldn’t admit it. Tommy you know in programming there’s a lot of pride involved in our work. When you sit there and think and contort your brain to find a solution and you come up short – it hurts. That was his problem. I wrote the question. I know what it should do. Nobody else has a problem with my answer, but this one does. You’ll see a few cases like that in programming. Someone too big for their breeches.

***TG:*** I really thought it was the right answer!

***Wood:*** (laughing) No, it wasn’t you.

***TG:*** Speaking of pride and big heads – What would you describe as your best lesson and why? That lesson where afterword you thought to yourself “I’m the man!”...

***Wood:*** Hmmm… I’d have to point to a lesson I planned in front of my college president ages ago. Remember those old daisy wheel printers? We had just purchased one and the $800 board that went in it. It allowed you to print lines in the printer, not just words. That was something.

About this time Dr. Luft walks in.

***Dr. Luft:*** This story again?

***Wood:*** (laughing) He asked. I figured out a way to use Pascal (a programming language) to print math functions on the printer using this add-on. I had to write some code to stretch, flip and rotate the graphs so the printer would print them properly. You see, we had to print them upside down since the y-value increases and the printer only prints *down* the page; we had to do it all upside down.
I assigned it in one day and they took right to it. It was really cutting edge stuff at the time – very advanced.

***TG:*** Well, this probably ties right into that: How have educational changes over the years impacted you?

***Wood:*** Technology changes have advanced light-years beyond what I started with. I’d say that definitely fits the bill.

***Luft:*** Technology has really advanced from when I started too. Schools are migrating to online schools. Distance learning used to be based around video tapes, but now every class we offer has an online component.

***Wood:*** It has changed. I think for the better. The classroom is a more rich place of learning now. Not that it was sterile before, but students are bombarded with so much more input in their lives, they require new ways to see things in class.

***TG:*** What would you guys say to someone just joining your profession?

***Wood:*** Don’t smile ‘til Christmas.

***Luft:*** (laughs) I wish I prepared better when I first started teaching. I would create tests that were too hard or too easy. Students would get into a test and realize they didn’t know what I was asking for. My first tests were real boogers. I’ve learned what you guys (college students) can handle and I think we’re all happier now. (laughs)

***Wood:*** And preview those tests. I typically will create a test a week before it’s given. Then I’ll go back and look at it a few days later to give it a second glance. If I “review” my test the same day I write it I’m still in that same frame of mind, so it will all make sense to me, but if I wait a few days, it will all be fresh to me and I’ll be able to catch more problems that way.

***Luft:*** Another problem I’ve had is stratification. You have to pick questions that you know your A students will get, but the B won’t; and the B’s will get and the C’s won’t. That took me a while to figure out.

***TG:*** I hate these “you’ll just have to figure it out” lessons. (laughs) So, what are your impressions of high-stakes standardized testing?

***Wood:*** I think it’s too bad they have to teach to the test. There’s so much good stuff out there. We had the Lego workshop for teachers here that had some really cool stuff to do, but the teachers were just too busy with their testing to spend time teaching fun, educational things.

***Luft:*** I’ve been fortunate that I’ve not taught in public education. I taught in private school before becoming … a college professor. I think it’s a political posturing that makes politicians feel involved, but means nothing at the school level and actually hurts the students. I send my kids to private school.

***TG:*** Thanks for your thoughts on this. Dr. Luft, how long have you been teaching?

***Luft:*** 3 in high school, 12 in higher education and about 15 years as an outside instructor.

***TG:*** Alright, thank you gentlemen for your time. I’m sure I’ll be asking for guidance in the future.