

9-12-2006

# Convocation : 2006 : 09 : 12 : Mark Jerome Walters, "The Learnable Moment : From Scholarship to the Classroom"

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## Recommended Citation

Walters, Mark Jerome, "Convocation : 2006 : 09 : 12 : Mark Jerome Walters, "The Learnable Moment : From Scholarship to the Classroom"" (2006). *USFSP Convocations and Academic Symposia*. 4.  
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**The Learnable Moment:  
From Scholarship to the Classroom**  
Academic Convocation  
USF St. Petersburg  
Sept. 12, 2006

**Mark Jerome Walters**

Dr. White and Dr. Durand.

Thanks for the chance to speak today and thank you, especially, for all you've done to make USF St. Petersburg such an amazing place to work, to learn, to teach, to think, to be. When I see the letters USFSP, I think **U**ltimate **S**pot **F**or **S**cholarly **P**ursuit. Not just for us faculty but for our students; not just for scholarship but for teaching.

It's the relationship between these two—scholarship and teaching--that I want to talk about today: "How one's scholarship informs one's teaching"

But before getting to that question, I wanted to tell you a little secret; personal, but germane.

I did so poorly in grade school that teachers recommended I be sent to a remedial learning institution. But first, I was sent to a child psychiatrist for evaluation. His name was Dr. Sorkie. He lived in a house by a pond in the country. After hours of tests, he told my mother: "This kid isn't stupid," he said. "Get him some new teachers; or put him in a good school." Next thing I knew, I was in a school for smart boys.

At the end of the first week the English teacher—Mrs. Hutton—was handing back essays we'd written the day before, when she looked straight at me: Mark, take your essay and go to the front of the class.

I knew, then and there, that my life was about to end. Everything in my experience told me I would be introduced something like this: “Quiet everybody! The village idiot is about to speak!”

Instead, Mrs. Hutton put her arm around my shaking shoulders and stood with me. I still remember the cedar wood smell of her gray sweater sleeve. “A fine essay!” she said. “Please read it to the class.”

Overwhelmed by the sudden reversal of my intellectual fortunes, I managed, through my sobs, to read all 503 glorious words.

When I was done, Mrs. Hutton handed me a tissue, kissed the top my head and sent me back to my seat.

I tell you this story because at that moment I didn’t become a writer; at that moment, I decided to become a teacher. And the idea of teaching and writing has remained inseparable in my mind ever since that day. So the question of how my writing—that is, my creative scholarship—informs my teaching is very dear to me. And it’s from that perspective that I want to talk today.

Describing just how scholarship informs teaching can be difficult--like describing where the wind begins and ends: we feel it all around us, but when we reach out to grab it, it’s nowhere to be had.

Given this challenge, sometimes we ask, “Why struggle at all to articulate the connections? What’s the point?”

As far as I’m concerned, the intellectual sap that flows from my creative scholarship into the classroom is what keeps my teaching alive, and the better I understand the connection, the more I can nurture it. And if we do not constantly renew the connection, our teaching risks becoming a backwater

endeavor, an obligation severed from the lifeblood of the research we love. Teaching becomes a dead, rather than blossoming branch, of our scholarship.

Where to begin? The answers are unique to each of us, but I'd like to share just one of the ways my creative scholarship informs my teaching.

The most important thing I do in this regard is to keep a notebook I call the Journal of Learnable Moments. It captures the most conclusive moments of my research; that flash of understanding or awareness; the Edison moment when the light bulb glows or I grasped a concept for the first time; special moments of learning that changed not so much what I thought, but how I thought.

I began to keep the journal because so many of these moments slipped by like a hummingbird past the window. But I wanted to hold on to them as long as I could because they had something important to say to me. And, as I came to discover, important things to say to my students. The question for me is always how to transform the learnable moments of my creative scholarship into teachable moments for my students.

Let me read a few of these learnable moments and show how I tried to bring them to the classroom.

The first learnable moment has to do with my realization, as a young journalist and teacher, that our everyday speech is just littered with contradictions, most of them innocent, but contradictions nevertheless.

I am reminded of this whenever I sit down to read my notes from a recent interview I've done for one of my books. So many contradictions had escaped me, little contradictory things someone said during the interview that I should have caught. It happens to us all; most of the time we never notice. Once I realized this, I wrote in my journal: (And if I'd ever suspected I'd one day be

reading it to you, I'd surely have written it differently. But, hey, this is what I wrote:

Listen for contradictions in everyday speech as an owl listens for the footfall of mice.

And I'll tell my students the classic story of the old woman who just returned home from a visit to Israel. Her family greets her at the airport:

*"Grandma, how was your trip?" they ask.*

*"Oh, Israel was wonderful!"*

*"And the flight? How was that, Grandma?"*

*"The flight was horrible! And that airline food--it was poison. Just terrible! And such small servings!"*

*At which point her Talmudic-spirited grandson interrupts: But grandma, you just said the food was poison. So why are you now complaining about the small portions?*

Once you stop to listen, you'll be amazed by how many contradictions sneak by. As future journalists, my students are trained to spot and pursue them. I share with them, for example, the notes of an interview I once did with a zookeeper, who blamed the sudden disappearance of several extremely rare birds under his care on a violent Florida thunderstorm in March, the month before.

I didn't spot the contradiction at the time, but when I later read the transcript, I thought: a violent thunderstorm in Florida in winter? That's kind of a contradiction. Better pursue it.

So I got copies of all the weather radar tapes and data for the area for March of that year. Hardly a cloud in the sky! As the meteorologist at the National Weather Records Center told me, “It was great vacation weather.”

As it turned out, the storm story had been concocted to cover up the fact that the birds had died of neglect, or as I wrote in the conclusion of my book *A Shadow and a Song*, they had died “not by an act of God, but out of neglect by their earthly keepers.”

This has remained a powerful learnable moment for me and an effective teachable one for students: never let a contradiction sneak by unopposed.

So listen for those contradictions in everyday speech. Tell grandma when she’s contradicting herself. And watch out for those little, innocent contradictions in your own speech—especially if any of you out there ever happen to be interviewed by one of my students. Otherwise, they just might think you’re trying to hide something.

**Now, here’s another learnable moment from my journal: A fact is rarely immutable; what we call a fact is a judgment, at a particular point in time, as to whether or not something is true.**

As I tell my students, what we call a “fact” is often the accumulation of judgments over time. Every fact has a history—a genealogy, so to speak—that connects it to a larger tree of knowledge. In order for scholars after us to trace our judgments, we must leave a trail of sources for them—as good scholars have done before us.

“But a fact is a fact!” My students protest. “Why waste time researching?”

Because in researching a supposed fact we revisit past judgments. And revisiting a past judgment sometimes leads to a reversal of it. And in overturning a fact, we dispel a myth. Although these may be little myths, life is littered with little myths, I tell them, just as it is littered with little contradictions. And each one we clear from the path, the clearer the way to truth. A false door of knowledge becomes a door open to understanding.

I'll use the example from my latest book, which is a history of the nearly extinct sacred Hawaiian raven. Even some of the recent peer review literature maintains that Captain James Cook collected the very first specimen of this raven from Hawaii in the late 1700s and that this specimen had long since been lost in Europe.

But I show my students how, in revisiting Cook's original journals, I was able to cast doubt on the "fact" that Cook had brought the first one back from Hawaii. Further research showed that the first specimen was brought from Hawaii nearly a century after Cook. And after months of digging, I actually found it tucked in a metal drawer at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia! A myth dispelled, a raven found.

By the end of a course, my journalism students understand that a fact is not an immutable thing; a fact is an ever-ripening or sometimes rotting fruit on the tree of knowledge. And while a snake may have tended the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the tree of knowledge in my classroom had better be attended by Refworks or Endnote.

**Now, let me share a final example moment from my journal. As I wrote, "We waste too much time looking for the right answers, when we need to spend more time looking for the right questions."**

We journalists often blame bad interviews on the interviewee. In reality, the fault often lies with the interviewer. If we don't ask good questions, we don't get good answers. And so it is with scholarship.

And so I reframed this learnable moment for students: If an answer is only as good as its question, then the first step in finding an answer is to improve the question. "Never let me ask you a question," I will tell them, "but that you don't needle me into trying to improve it before you answer."

I once wrote a whole lecture called The Anatomy of a Question, which was a veritable study of the different kinds of questions people ask and how each is embedded with a silent agenda.

There is the loaded question, the leading question, the non-question, the ambush question; the Rorschach question; the Socratic question, the insulting question and rarest of all, the good question.

After the lecture a student raised his hand: "Mark, Is there such a thing as a stupid question?"

"Well," I said, "Let me offer some evidence, and you decide. Try this one," I said:

Dear Abby: I joined the Navy so I could see the world. Now that I've seen it, how do I get out?

Well, the student actually thought that was a pretty good question. That's okay. "Try this one," I said:

Dear Abby: I've never been able to trust the man I'm with. He's so unfaithful that I don't even know if the baby I'm carrying is his. What could I have done different?

The student thought for a moment, smiled and said only one thing. He said, hmhhh!

I knew then and there that my learnable moment had become a teachable one.

So let me end with an earlier question: Why take time at all to nurture the connections between scholarship and teaching? It keeps our teaching alive, for sure. But it's much more than that. The more we bring our lives as scholars into the classroom, the closer we bring students to our own love of learning. The closer we bring them to that, the more we nurture their impulse to learn. And when we nurture their impulse to learn, many of the facts we struggle to teach have a way of teaching themselves. Rote learning becomes spontaneous, unscripted learning. For me, when this happens, it's the second wind, the runner's high, in the marathon of every course.

Let me leave you with this final thought: Practitioners of ancient Japanese ink art tell us that the brush must become an extension of the artist's hand. Well, what if we imagined our teaching to be one of the paintbrushes of our scholarship? What if, instead of asking how scholarship informs our teaching we could ask how it infuses it?

Unlike the brush in the artist's hand, our scholarship and teaching will never become one. But there is no reason they need remain separate, as two.