

B) TEACHING PHILOSOPHY: ROTTUNO Today many question the worth of a humanities education. Many students and parents ask, "what can one do with an English degree?" I see my job as an English professor as answering those questions through my class activities and my actions as an academic. To do so, I strive to stimulate engaging conversations.

Conversations are, or rather became, the touchstone of my assignments. I learned early on that as much as students enjoyed reading *Dracula*, they did not enthusiastically respond to questions that asked them, for example, what Stoker's characters gained from writing journals and letters. However, a slight shift jumpstarted my students. I asked them to take on Dracula's voice and write to one of the characters, explaining the Count's evaluation of that character, perhaps even hinting at how he would put his insights to use. I asked students to write to someone and for a specific goal. Their writing took on an aura of reality, and I knew then that all my assignments must offer "real world" tasks and audiences. While the majority of my "real world" assignments still ask students to write to and for imagined audiences, a number of my students have composed writings for and inspired by conversations with elderly Altoona Housing Authority residents. Such outreach work typifies one of my central goals: leading students and myself outside our "comfort zones" to test ideas. This goal also led me to the Education Abroad office.

I have led two one-week trips to London and seen its urban and intellectual environment expand my students' educational and career plans, that is, initiate them into a more global dialogue. During May of 2012 students and I toured the Bishopsgate Archive and Library, led by archivist Stefan Dickers. Dickers' enthusiasm for this collection of East End London history is infectious and ably showed the students that archival work was neither tedium nor the stuff of Dan Brown novels. This visit led students to grasp my goals when I had them work with online 19th-century periodicals and appreciate my discussions of how my research at the British Postal Archive added illuminating examples to my book *Postal Plots in British Fiction, 1840-98* (Palgrave, 2013). These discussions confirmed that bringing my research into my classrooms—I show composition students my revision process, often shocking them with pages that turned blue from an editor's pencil—can model the fact that intellectual growth comes from entering dialogues with people engaged with the issues that fascinate you.

Students need to see that sort of productive intellectual curiosity in action. To that end, Erin Murphy, English Program coordinator, and, I, as honors program coordinator, spearheaded in 2012-13 the series "Spotlight on Teaching and Research" (STAR) in which faculty described how they integrate research into their classrooms. This program, that continues this year, encouraged students to talk to their professors about their research. This program also helped to highlight the interdisciplinary of our campus, something that invigorates my work with honors students.

In April 2012 the honors program took a field trip to the Flight 93 Memorial led by Biology professor Carolyn Mahan. There we learned of the memorial's goal to use witnesses' oral histories and their need for volunteers to compose abstracts of these interviews so that researchers can use the valuable stories. A history professor in Spring 2013 had his students do such work; this semester the honors freshman, under my direction, are working on abstracts, and Carolyn and other science professors are setting up student internships at the memorial. Altoona students will be part of the creation of this Memorial, this part of history, this real life conversation. To insure that such projects and the other notable research that happens on our campus is celebrated, I remodeled our Undergraduate Research Fair from a forum limited to poster presentations to one open to oral presentations, performances, and exhibitions; last year's response to the format predicts that this year's Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities Fair will be even better.

My work with the honors program and undergraduate research projects mirrors the ideal I strive for in my classroom. Andrew Delbanco, author of *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* captures that ideal when he suggests that college classrooms can be rehearsal spaces for democracy, for one walks in with one idea and walks out with another or at least with productive uncertainty. I ask my students to come with questions and work with them so that they can develop the tools needed to answer those questions.