



## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

In my pre-academic life I was employed as the Supervisor of Operations for MuchMusic, at Chum Television. From time to time I would be stopped in the hallway by somebody and asked about 'how things worked' – how television cameras made their pictures, how videotape recorders got the video onto the tape and back off again, and so on. This became so much of a habit that one day I went to my supervisor and said, "I'm getting tired of explaining the same thing over and over again to everybody. I think this place needs a technical 'how-to' book."

A year later I had written the first edition of the "Citytv/MuchMusic Television Operations Technical Reference Manual". I printed 50 copies of this 250-page book and put it up for sale for twenty-five dollars to cover the photocopying costs. It sold out in a day and a half. I printed 100 more and they sold out in two weeks. Clearly I was on to something. Apparently, everybody was buying this book – operations staff, production personnel, switchboard receptionists, on-air presenters, the engineering group (which sort of surprised and somewhat frightened me) – even the President, Moses Znaimer, bought a copy. And then, the inevitable happened: Moses called me into his office.

He said that he wasn't accustomed to having projects just pop up in his 'environment' without his knowing about them ahead of time. He wanted to know how I'd written this book, and why. In all honesty, I hadn't quite figured that out myself, so I told him "I just felt that it needed doing."

"So," he said, "It's a labour of love."

"Yeah, Moses. I guess it is."

He paused a moment, smiled and said "Will you autograph my copy?"

## THE TEACHING BEGINS

A few months later, after I had yet again explained something to somebody at Citytv, they said, "That's the clearest explanation I've ever heard. I finally understand it for the first time. You should teach this stuff."

The end of the story is one you can see coming. The following autumn I began my work at Ryerson, explaining the thing I knew best – television technical theory. One morning a week in 1994 has led to over two decades of teaching at Ryerson University.

## TEACHING FROM THE HEART

The above anecdote exemplifies the main hub of my teaching philosophy. There are a lot of theories on how somebody becomes a good teacher, and whether good teachers are born or made. A lot of people say that you learn how to teach from other expert professors, articles about best practices, and so on. All of that definitely helps and certainly from those people, and that research, I have learned a great deal. However, I believe there is one factor that comes into play perhaps above and beyond all else. Not because it's part of your job. Not because you get paid to do it. You teach because it's a labour of love.

That's a beautiful sentiment, but it needs some elaboration.

Mental health professionals have noted that to be truly happy you should not be asking what others can do for you, but rather what you can *give* to others. That, to me, is the essence of exemplary teaching. Every day, indeed every hour, the first questions in my mind are "What can I give to the students so that they will have an outstanding learning experience?" "How can I engage the students better?" "How can I explain that concept more effectively?"

## THE TOOLS AND THE PHILOSOPHY IN ACTION

Back in the 1990s, the tools for teaching were simpler. The ground-breaking technology at the time was the overhead projector, which allowed some degree of interactivity with text, diagrams, illustrations, and washable markers. With a little care in cleaning off the marks, the overhead cels could be used year after year, and with the ability to photocopy complex pictures onto those cels, it was possible to create an extensive library of material. Because I was constantly asking myself how to better engage students and explain concepts, I began to collect a great deal of material, including journal and industry magazine articles, books and other examples. The articles alone eventually filled an entire filing cabinet drawer; the books began to overrun my bookshelves.

Because demonstrating a concept is a much more effective way of teaching than simply talking about it or even showing a picture, I also accumulated a very large number of props – pieces of electronic hardware – to show in class. Sometimes I realized that I needed to create my own props, which could be as simple as a modified Pringles can to demonstrate how shotgun



microphones work, or as complex as a small radio transmitter using a metal Slinky as a radio antenna. These samples of real equipment, then and now, fill several shelves and an entire filing cabinet.

With the coming of the digital age and the massive amount of content available on the Internet, the collecting continues. All of the original magazine and journal articles have now been scanned, which means I can make them available to any student who has a question about almost anything. All of the props I have (and hundreds of other pieces of real life technology) have been photographed and carefully filed to augment my lectures. That said, I still fill my backpack almost every week with these pieces of equipment to show in class. The document camera, now a standard device in an electronic podium, is used to zoom into a close-up of a piece of gear and project it on the screen. My students can now see, “live”, how something works.

Videos, of course, are an excellent teaching tool. Sometimes there is something on YouTube which I will incorporate into my presentations. More frequently, however, there is nothing online that solves the question of how I can explain a concept more effectively. For that reason several years ago I started my own YouTube channel where I could create and post my own videos, while at the same time making them available to the world at large – again, another element of the “giving” ethic of my teaching philosophy.

## **GIVING OUTSIDE THE BOX**

In this section I would like to elaborate more about how the culture of “giving” extends in so many directions as part of my teaching philosophy.

Education shouldn't be so expensive. One of the more significant costs is the price of textbooks. I certainly appreciate the work involved in writing a textbook and the important information it provides a student (having written one myself.) But I also realize, especially in an introductory course, that the content is mostly fundamentals – basic knowledge of which no one author has sole ownership.

It was with that in mind, even at the beginning of my teaching, that I made my textbook available in the bookstore for a price that covered little more than the costs of the copying. Eventually I delivered an online version of the book on the Internet, making it available for free to anyone who was interested in the material. In more recent years I have developed three interactive e-textbooks that cover all of the material for not only my course, but for our first year video production labs as well. These latest materials replace our former required textbook which used to cost upwards of \$200.

Tutorials, especially with sometimes complex content, are extremely helpful for students as they contextualize the material before in-class tests. A decade ago I wanted to conduct special seminars for my class, but without the bother of getting a lecture hall and having the students commute long distances to attend the session. Jeremy Littler's Unitecast software was instrumental in making that happen in an online environment, where I could be available to my students and review salient concepts before each test. At the time I believe I was one of the only professors at Ryerson doing this – Unitecast was in its early beta test stages and it was, to put it mildly, not for the faint of heart in terms of its usability for the professor. I continue to work with Jeremy on the Unitecast project to this day, and the students have definitely benefitted from the experience. Because the sessions are recorded and can be played back at any time after the live session, there is considerable repeat viewing. This past semester's videos were viewed an average of *six times* by every student in my 250-person lecture.

## **STUDENTS ARE HUMAN BEINGS**

Even after giving so much free information to my students – as well as other students and professors from other institutions using my content on the Internet – I discovered, somewhat to my surprise, that some students were very unprepared in even the most basic fundamentals of university life. We, as seasoned university professors, know these principles intuitively – how to take notes, synthesize information and study for tests; how to write a proper mid-term paper; the rules on cheating and plagiarism; how to implement effective time management and so on. Our collective memories (however subjective they may be) recall that we were taught much of this in high school. This doesn't appear to be happening at the same level today. Perhaps today's young minds are being shaped differently by their immersion in social media activities, or perhaps the pedagogical methods have changed in secondary schools, so these skills are less emphasized than in years past. Whatever the reasons, I understood that we can't expect students to develop skills that they haven't yet been taught. That, to say the least, is poor pedagogical practice. For that reason, I developed a ten-part YouTube series called University 101 and, again, gave it to my students (and, indeed, everyone) for free. In only forty minutes, they can watch the entire series and learn about all of these university survival topics.

Many years ago, the Media Production program (then called Radio and Television Arts) added a fourth year to its curriculum, introducing a major production course called Practicum. There are two parts to doing a major media production - all of the 'nuts and bolts', and the human dynamics.



The 'nuts and bolts' is quite vast. This part of Practicum informs students about pitching a project, budgeting, contracts, pre-production and post-production, casting, and so on. In addition, there is the massive amount of detailed paperwork that goes into what we call a 'production bible'. This is the book that has every tiny detail about the production, from the script, to the props, makeup and wardrobe, shooting schedule, call sheets, equipment lists – everything. The production bible is so complex that it fills a collection of three-ring binders.

There is a lot of information on the Internet about all of these areas of production, but it is scattered all over. As Head of Practicum I decided that yet another textbook needed to be written to put all of this in one place, so I wrote our 100-page *Practicum Handbook*. It is still used to this day as we haven't found a more suitable publication, especially with the level of detail that applies to the facilities and procedures within the RTA School of Media.

The nature of the Practicum course means that a small group of students will be working very closely together for *six months*. But students up to this point have been taught well that education is about being competitive. It has largely been all about the grades rather than experiential learning in a collaborative environment. Who got the highest mark? How am I doing compared to others? Using my years of experience working as a manager of thirty-five people at MuchMusic, I created the *Human Dynamics Handbook*. It deals with setting ground rules for effective communication, respect and trust, conflict management, stress, and general problem solving. It has become a survival guide to successfully accomplishing the Practicum project. Countless times, students have let me know how important this book is, since they have never been taught any of this in all of their education up to this point. In one case, they even said that it "saved our Practicum group from imploding." Even though I haven't taught the Practicum course for several years, I am invited back each year to give a full lecture on this important element of their process. It is something that I hope they take with them not only as they work on their final year project, but in the years ahead as they continue on their successful career paths.

Finally, we need to go where the students are – not make them come to us. And where are the students today? On social media, of course. However, doing the groundwork is important before a professor dives into the social media student pool.

The most important factor is gaining trust. Students tend to be mistrustful of many professors, as they see their relationship with instructors as an "us versus them" situation. If I had started engaging with students on social media before gaining their trust in the classroom and showing them unwaveringly that I am here to help them, my endeavours on Facebook would not have been as successful as they have been. Being honest, never condescending or demeaning, and always helpful is key. It has gained me hundreds of followers. More importantly, we have mutual respect for each other. Through developing this relationship over many years, I am now considered one of the "cool profs" (their words, not mine) and am allowed almost exclusive access to the yearly Facebook closed group that is created by senior students for each new cohort.

A wonderful side effect of my honest presence in social media and putting myself 'out there' is that it's a two-way street. Certainly, they get to see my thoughts from my many posts but I also get a rare opportunity to see what my students are thinking, what their interests are, and so on. This helps me relate to them in class because I get a glimpse into where their heads are, and what is engaging them at the moment. Mind you, sometimes I get this wrong and students do not hesitate to tell me I'm not in touch! But that's learning, too. They correct me – and a *dialogue* ensues.

## **A CONCLUSION?**

There is no conclusion to the ongoing process of improving one's effective teaching. It's an iterative process. It began for me as a new instructor two decades ago, learning and implementing the complexities and nuances of pedagogical thinking. It continues to be something that I do, every day. Certainly, I've learned a lot and used that knowledge in practice (coincidentally, a concept I also teach my students every week) – but that process is never-ending.

We, as professors, have been given the greatest gift of all – the opportunity to teach young minds, to stimulate their thoughts, and prepare them for a complex but fulfilling future. We must continually ask ourselves the key questions - how to facilitate better student engagement, explain and educate more clearly, and out of all of this, provide our students with an exceptional learning experience.

And just when you think you've provided the best materials, created a well-polished course or lecture series, perhaps even been given many accolades by your appreciative students? Well, that just means that you now start the process again.

And always...always...with the happiness that comes from giving.