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MY COLLEGE EDUCATION

Christine A. Rydel

Unlike the gentleman author who claims he reached his educational highpoint in kindergarten, I value what I learned at college, both at Mundelein (my *alma mater*) and at Grand Valley State (my academic “home” for half of my life). Though vastly different in mission, orientation, and scope, they both gave me the opportunity to experience the myriad joys of team-teaching, first as a student and then as a professor. However, upon reflection I think I have been a better student at Grand Valley than I was at Mundelein.

The year-long freshman honors humanities course that the late Sister Mary Antonia, B.V.M. and Mrs. Sally Chappell created, *Literature and the Arts*, gave me my first taste of interdisciplinary studies. We investigated the connections between literature and the arts from the classical Greek period to the twentieth century. For many of our classes we met at the Art Institute of Chicago, where we all had library privileges. At the same time we were all enrolled in a two-semester sequence, the History of Western Civilization. These coordinated courses introduced us to thinking in terms of the “big picture” by focusing on the details. In later years our honors courses concentrated on the scientific method, the nature of time, quantum physics, philosophy (both classical and modern) and theology. The Jesuits from next door (Loyola University) guided us through theology so well that I later could never understand Faust’s strong misgivings about “the queen of disciplines.” My initial impressions of a good liberal arts education, especially the collegiality, cooperation and intellectual curiosity of my professors, convinced me early that this was the kind of life I wanted to live.

When I arrived at Grand Valley eager but very green, I felt isolated and somewhat disillusioned. Fortunately Walter Foote came to my rescue. At that time he taught World Literature 204, Literary Masterpieces, a course that started with *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and ended with *Miss Julie*. Back then the literature courses were filled to the rafters, thanks to wonderful teachers like Walter, Lou Rus, Loretta Wasserman, Bob Chamberlain, Bill Oldenburg, and to the students’ genuine interest in the humanities in general, and in literature in particular. I always remember those days with great fondness. Walter and I would sit in the Grand Traverse Room in Lake Michigan Hall, drinking cokes and planning literature courses we wanted to teach together. I’d walk over to Mackinac Hall and chat with friends in English, History, Philosophy. And it didn’t matter whether we were old, young, tenured or untenured—we all seemed to like each other, get along and have a good time. I felt that I was lucky to have what I had dreamed about eight years earlier at Mundelein. When Walter invited me to lecture on *Crime and Punishment* in his class, I felt quite honored. While he let me make the class my own, he entered into the discussion, thus giving me my first experience in team-teaching on the other side of the lectern.

My first “genuine” experiment in team-teaching materialized with the arrival of Edward Cole in the History Department. Tony Parise introduced us somewhere behind Lake Superior Hall before school began in 1971. I remember taking Edward aside and, with all the seasoned experience of a one-year veteran, warning him that GVSC students really weren’t anything like those he had encountered at the University of California at Berkeley! I have Tony to thank for what became an enduring friendship and a fruitful partnership in building the Russian Studies Program. After we received approval to offer a major, we decided to teach together a course on 18th-century Russia. Since then we have collaborated on a course in Russian philosophy which has evolved into Edward’s History 391: Russian Thought, and our capstone, Russia in Context.

With all of the unrealistic enthusiasm of young professors newly unleashed from graduate school, Edward and I clearly overworked our students. In addition to their history texts, they read a two-volume anthology of eighteenth-century Russian literature, a not unreasonable assignment. However, each student had to look up every reference to Western literature in his section of the anthology, read the works that appeared in the footnotes, and then compile a heavily annotated bibliography of all the works that influenced 18th century Russian literature. We had them reading Anacreon, Boileau, Voltaire, Horace, Juvenal, Corneille, Racine, Molière, Addison, Steele, Diderot, Defoe, Pindar, Fontenelle, St. Augustine, Benjamin Franklin, Legrand, and La Fontaine, among others, not to mention the obscure writers Russians love to import.

The students learned the critical role literature played (and plays) in Russia’s history and national character. Edward and I finally learned in depth all of those facts we had memorized merely to pass doctoral “prelims.” But we also learned a secret of teaching: the more you expect from your students, the more they give. These proto-Russian Studies students never complained, but took some perverse pride in being overworked—a trait that still characterizes that strange creature known as a Russian Studies major. Our majors all feel an instant kinship with Dostoevsky’s “Underground Man,” who defends the beneficent, humanizing, consciousness-heightening benefits of suffering.

The later courses Edward and I taught together were all interdisciplinary, with the exception of Russian Philosophy. I recall Edward’s relating to me how a member of the fabled “A-1 Carpool” was astonished when he found out that the first Russian philosopher appeared only in the 18th century and positively swooned in disbelief when he learned that the philosopher was a Ukrainian. Russian philosophy really began in the Enlightenment, which arose in Russia only *after* Romanticism! In this course, as well as in our interdisciplinary capstone, which investigates the “Russian mind” through its history, religion and literature, we always end up with more questions about Russia than when we began.

My second partner in team-teaching also became one of my closest friends, Ursula Franklin. In the early 1970s we gave a course on French and Russian Symbolism. Ursula taught me so many things, especially how to look at French literature on its own merits, not just as an influence on Russian culture. She

introduced the students and me to the true meaning of hermetic literature and showed us how to use the proper keys to unlock its mysteries. Ursula's wide background in philosophy and literature (English, French and German) and her impeccable critical skills inspired the students—and her colleague. If Ursula had not spurred in me an interest in late 19th century culture, I never would have embarked on my next team-teaching experiment with the incomparable Richard Marks.

Richard may be one of the most brilliant people who ever taught at Grand Valley. A Cornell Ph.D. in medieval history, he was equally knowledgeable in classics, German, literature, art and music; and, not least important, he was also a wonderful cook. We both arrived at Grand Valley in 1970, felt a certain "Slavic" kinship, and struck up a friendship that lasts until today. For years we dreamed of teaching together an interdisciplinary course in an area outside of our specialities, but well within our interests. Thus came into being in 1977, History 380/World Lit 380: Decadence and Renewal. Together with ten intrepid students, we set out to explore the cultural scene in England, Western Europe, Eastern Europe and Russia between 1880 and 1914. We looked at history, literature, architecture, art and music to try to figure out what we meant by "Decadence and Renewal." Guest lecturers added to the richness of the course: Ursula on Mallarmé and Valéry, the late Frank Schwarz on Gaudi and Barcelona, as well as D'Annunzio; the late Ingrun Lafleur on "The Vienna Scene: Arts and Radical Politics;" Jim Dana (GVSC graduate and translator) on Rilke's *Duino Elegies*; and Steve Aulie (GVSC student and professional music critic) on Rudolph Steiner and Anthroposophical, Theosophical and Spiritual Movements of the age. And then there was the music—Wagner, Richard Strauss, Ravel, Brahms, Schoenberg, Mahler, Scriabin, Stravinsky, and Bartok. As we listened, we followed librettos. Richard and I reversed roles as he taught the Russian writer Kuzmin and I taught Thomas Mann. What fun we had in the course as we decorated the room for Decadence with a Beardsley print tablecloth, black candles and dead plants; we adorned it for Renewal with fresh narcissus in an art nouveau vase and white candles on a pristine white cloth. We really could not recreate the era, but we tried. It also helped that Richard resembled Gustave Mahler.

For a while we thought the course had been a failure, especially as we read the finals. We wondered where we had gone wrong as we graded the students' work and cried into our beer and superbly spiced Indonesian chicken (Richard cooked). Not one student received an A; only one earned a B. It was only later that we knew that the course eventually worked. No students complained about a grade; rather they told us that they had learned so much, and even more important, wanted to learn more. Whenever they went to a Mahler concert, they would call Richard. Years passed and several came back to tell me how much that class had opened their eyes to a world they never knew existed. Richard, alas, is no longer at Grand Valley, but he is still working his magic in Brentwood, California.

When, in the early 1980s, I had the privilege of becoming director of the Grand Valley Honors Program and received the task of restructuring it, I naturally turned back to my Mundelein model. In the 1980s honors students were able to fulfill all of their general education requirements within the program, which I tried to base on the

old “Structured Distribution Requirements” Dewey Hoytenga and I devised in the early 1970s. As freshmen, the honors students took a year-long, twelve-credit course in the humanities, which included history, literature, art, and philosophy. The two years I taught in the humanities course along with Edward Cole, Gray Sweeney, Loretta Wasserman and Ted Young, we concentrated on the nineteenth century. The students later took a six-hour, year-long team-taught course in the social sciences: Richard Joannis and Bill Baum investigated social and political thought of the nineteenth century. In the sciences we offered courses, both individually and team-taught, that featured professors such as Dan Andersen, Don Hall, Dick Lefebvre and Shelley Kopperl. The students were also required to enroll in an honors seminar in a specific topic and to write a senior honors thesis which they formally presented to the faculty and students.

In the freshman humanities course, all five of us were present at every class. In effect, we all became students again. However, the most valuable lessons I learned from my peers were not necessarily about the nineteenth century. I saw how Loretta, a model of grace and serenity in the classroom, combined lectures with a talent for drawing students into discussion. She guided them through the literature, putting them at their ease, finding value in their opinions, and leading them to discover truths. I watched as Gray, so well-versed in history and literature, always put art in context. He made students react by challenging their complacency and forcing them to defend their positions. As he played devil’s advocate in Western Michigan, his almost Marxist attitude stirred our students to reevaluate their beliefs. And then there was Ted Young, who always looked at the modern philosophers through the eyes of a classicist. When he began to lecture on Eiseley’s *Darwin’s Century*, he told the class that each day he recited the Creed, the foundation of his faith. Ted taught me not to fear to speak my mind, but to “profess,” really the first obligation of our job. Edward, whose passion for history and gift for making it come alive, provided the foundation for the course. His orderly and structured lectures that covered the serious issues were also full of anecdotes that made us feel we were at the Congress of Vienna eavesdropping on Metternich, suffering in the Crimean War, clattering along on the first train ride, or watching Bismarck create a new world order. All in all, I think we balanced and complemented each other.

I fear that our “canonical” reading lists and traditional approaches will condemn us in the eyes of our younger colleagues as hopelessly old-fashioned. But I am convinced that our common bonds in the past allowed us to teach together; at least we could talk to and understand each other—and engage our students in the conversation. Such a course will probably never occur again at Grand Valley. It’s hard to work together the way we did when you’re busy deconstructing. And besides, though we may have been a successful experiment, we were hardly cost-effective.

Of course we weren’t always serious; we also had fun. Sometimes we were even a little goofy. I still don’t know what compelled Richard and me to run hand-in-hand into the final examination singing the main motif from Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries.” At least we didn’t follow through on our plan to serve the students a Decadent dinner in which all of the foodstuffs would be green. However, food plays a

recurring role in the story. The students in Russian Studies 380 got together and surprised Edward and me with a Russian Philosophers' cake, a multi-tiered concoction with quotations from Russian philosophy piped in on the layers. On the very top they placed a Russian philosopher (I can't remember which one), who stood there crookedly, like some abandoned, drunken bridegroom.

When we took the honors students to Chicago to the Art Institute, we had dinner at the Berghoff. The students all felt compelled to order Napoleons for dessert, because the course had begun with the French Revolution. They thought it a swell joke. On the same trip, I enjoyed my first oysters, thanks to Gray and Edward. Earlier in the semester, Gray had flashed a painting of raw oysters on the screen, which caused Edward to roll his eyes and lick his lips at the thought of such a treat. When he later learned that I had never tried raw oysters, he made it his mission to introduce me to the delicacy. He was as good as his word—and so were the oysters. Bass Ale became our traditional drink, mainly because Edward had discerned the label on a bottle in Manet's "Bar at the Folies Bergère" and because we could find it at the Arboreal Inn near Grand Haven, the scene of our final honors "debriefing." I must hasten to add that we never indulged ourselves too much, probably because we took to heart Gray's cautionary tale of how Courbet drank himself to death by consuming so much beer that his spleen burst.

We had many good times with the students. At the end of the first honors class sequence, we held a picnic at my house. Edward manned the grill while Gray took groups of students for boat rides on the *Angus* in the Grand Haven Channel and beyond. Our various bus trips to museums in Chicago, Muskegon and Detroit (where we all went to dine in the Greek section of the city) helped to deepen the camaraderie we felt with the students in the classroom. What great days! What great students!

Recently Edward and I were sitting and brooding in my office, feeling a bit isolated, discouraged and disenchanting with life in "the academy." Perceiving ourselves to be "under siege," we could easily imagine how the 13th-century Russians felt when they first heard the mighty hooves of Tatar steeds as the Golden Horde descended upon Holy Rus'. But then Marcia Daniels Knol, one of the honors students from Freshman Humanities, 1982-83, stopped by to see whether we were still around doing the same old things. She currently teaches biology labs at Grand Valley as an adjunct. After informing us about what all of the other honors alumni are doing now, she began to tell us how she teaches her children at home, constantly referring to her notes from our honors class. She told us that those '82-'83 honors students are still friends, still meet, and still reminisce about their "golden days" in the program. As Marcia spoke, Edward and I started to feel better, as we always do around students. They "energize" us. Those two years of teaching the honors courses will always be high points in my life, thanks to my students and my "team." As Marcia was leaving, she stopped, looked at us, and said, "Boy, did you guys teach!" To which I would now like to reply, "Boy, did you guys learn!"—and, I might add, so did we.