

Focus on Faculty

Montgomery College

Center for Teaching and Learning

February 2006

Topics for Keeping Students and Professors

Interested and Inspired in EN001 and EN002 Classes

by Cathie Mathews, Adjunct Professor of English, Germantown

Inside This Issue

Topics for Keeping Students and Professors Interested and Inspired in EN001 and EN002 Classes 1

Recommended Reading - Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time 2

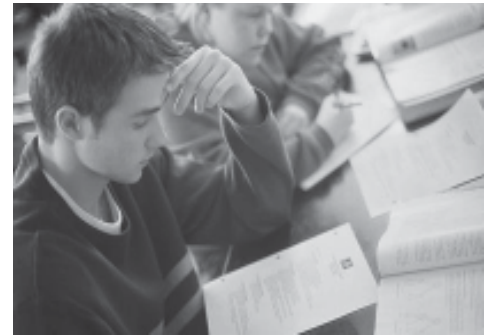
From the Interim Director of the CTL 2

Book Recommendations for Teachers 3

March/April 2006 CTL Workshop Topics 3

Metaphors spark the imagination, which is, to Albert Einstein devotees, more important than knowledge. Two popular metaphors, baseball's Three Strikes-and-You're-Out, now a label for mandatory life sentences, and the literary "The Devil Made Me Do It," which has evolved into the "Twinkie" Defense/a corollary to diminished capacity, recently proved interesting and helpful to an EN002 class in search of writing topics. This works best towards the end of the semester, after each student has successfully completed several essays.

Our campus library holds two (among many others) PBS and news documentaries that illustrate legal cases. After watching and discussing each video on separate days, the class and I "thought-gather" issues & facts and make connections between students' life experiences and knowledge from several sources, not just the videos (in fact, the metaphors actually have students searching the web for more information on the legal cases showcased in the videos without my suggesting it—they want to know more! Imagine!).



Two groups are formed, with class time for identifying strategies, e.g., defining *justice* or *revenge*, or comparing/contrasting one factor with another, explaining the process of creating a new law, and most importantly, Planning, Planning, Planning! Each group provides the other with three EFFECTIVE thesis statements, each with a blueprint (the order in which three elements that support the thesis will be developed in a five-paragraph essay), supporting or refuting the thesis. The result is six possible topics and the underlying structure for an outline, often the most difficult part of writing college essays. This is also a great opportunity for interdisciplinary study, i.e., history, sociology, psychology, women's studies: endless possibilities! Here's what happens with each group:

GROUP 1

Three Strikes (...and you're out!) left the baseball field to become the title of the California law first written by a grieving father, Mike Reynolds, to send VIOLENT, repeat offenders to prison for life on the occasion of their third conviction. In 1992, his 18-year-old daughter, Kimber, was shot to death by a twice-convicted felon. Her killer died a short time later fleeing from police.

(See *Interested and Inspired*, page 4)

Recommended Reading -

Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time

by Betsey Zwing, Professor of English, Rockville

Unless you've locked yourself in your office for the past few years, you have heard much talk at MC about civic responsibility, civic engagement, community service, and service learning (now, in fact, a "pillar" of the Learning College initiative). So, maybe you are thinking about getting more involved in the conversation, or maybe you are investigating how to incorporate service learning into your class, or maybe you are wondering why we are even having this conversation at all.

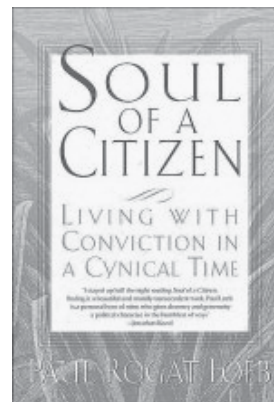
A good read for those of you interested in the concept of civic engagement is Paul Rogat Loeb's book entitled *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time*. Loeb, a scholar at Seattle's Center for Ethical Leadership as well as a community activist dating back to the Vietnam era, has made it his life's work to research why and how some Americans become involved in their community, and others do not.

Readers will learn quickly that Loeb is a hard-core idealist with a deep well of hope. He is clearly frustrated with cynics who look at the world as a dark, corrupt, and greedy place so they detach from it, retreat into their private lives, and mock the naiveté of those who work hard to change it. In fact, he devotes a whole chapter ("The Cynical Smirk") to refuting the cynical arguments about the supposed futility of social engagement.

Besides cynics, Loeb's target audience is caring individuals who feel overwhelmed by the depth of social problems and powerless to make a difference in the world. In speaking to this group, he is definitely addressing many of our students, maybe even you. Loeb takes care, however, not to criticize. He strikes a friendly, non-judgmental tone when he says that one of the "critical questions" of the book is "how we, as individuals, can learn to heed our deepest convictions, to act—together with others—toward shaping a better world, and to continue doing so throughout our lives. In particular, I'd like this book to be an antidote to the sense of powerlessness that pervades our culture" (9). In short, Loeb wants us all to search for a more hopeful way to live.

Early chapters explore some of the mistaken beliefs he thinks people have about social activists and their causes. In the chapter entitled "We Don't Have to Be Saints," Loeb assures his readers that active citizens are as imperfect, busy, and afraid as the rest of us; they are not "fulfilling some preordained destiny" but "developing character by speaking out" (49). "One Step at a Time" illustrates how change is an incremental process—"each step, no matter how awkward or hesitant, prepares us for the next" (62). Woven throughout the book are several inspiring stories of average Americans—a commercial fisherman, a housewife with an eighth grade education, a teacher, a massage therapist, a high school student, to name a few—who left their isolated, safe, private worlds and, slowly over time, managed to work with others to create change in their communities. Loeb even devotes a whole chapter, "The Call of Stories," to the power of storytelling to move people to take action.

Near the end of the book, one community activist reflects on the choice we face. From Sonya Vetra Tinsley's perspective, there are "two teams in this world." The cynics explain "why nothing is going to change, why no matter how hard you work, you're going to fail" (341). The other team "admit[s] that they don't know how things will turn out, but have decided to work for change...that change is really possible" (341). Cynicism or hope. Which team are you on? Tinsley says even if the cynics are right, "Who wants to win that argument anyway?" If you are reflecting on civic responsibility, perhaps searching for ways out of the cynicism, then you will want to read this book. ❖



From the Interim Director of the CTL



Faculty members are constantly seeking ways to support student learning. Engaging in group work and making learning relevant to the lives of the students are ways to engage them, as Professor Cathie Mathews reports. Reading about teaching, learners, and learning is another way to reflect on current practices. Perhaps you will add one or more of these books to your professional reading list. Enjoy this issue of *Focus on Faculty*. ❖ -- Patti Bartlett

Book Recommendations for Teachers

by Sally McClean, Adjunct Professor of English,
Germantown

Teacher Man, by Frank McCourt

Before becoming a professional author, Frank McCourt, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Angela's Ashes* and *Tis: A Memoir*, taught for 30 years. He describes his experience in the book *Teacher Man*, which the jacket cover calls "An urgent tribute to teachers everywhere . . . bold and spirited prose featuring his irreverent wit and heart-breaking honesty."

McCourt used several innovative writing techniques: one was to write an excuse note from Adam or Eve to God, and another was to write a suicide note of 150 words because "Samuel Johnson said the prospect of hanging in the morning focuses the mind wonderfully." Although the assignment is a bit unusual, the book is a good read.

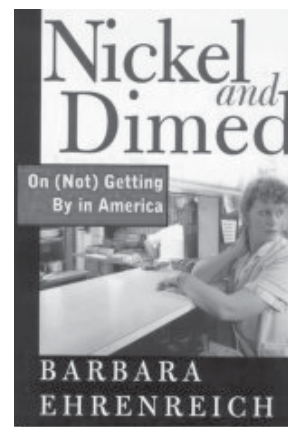
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, by Mark Haddon

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, a novel by Mark Haddon, is a book I have not been able to put down. It's a coming-of-age story involving a young man who is a math genius but who has trouble understanding human emotions. Haddon's excellent book is especially interesting and informative for teachers in seeing into the minds of young folks, in this case, an autistic young man. And the utter honesty and awareness about reality is refreshing, from "dog poo," to frightening strangers, to loud crowds and confusing London train signs and sounds. As Ian McEwan, the author of *Atonement*, says, Haddon is "a wise and bleakly funny writer with rare gifts of empathy." The book, an astounding yet delightful quick read, is a *Today Show* book club selection and a *New York Times* Notable Book.

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America, by Barbara Ehrenreich

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America by Barbara Ehrenreich is a *New York Times* bestseller. In the book, Ms. Ehrenreich, a journalist, goes "Undercover" to write about her secret experiences as a waitress, a Merry Maid housecleaner, a hotel maid, a housing home aide, and a Wal-Mart salesperson. She lives on only the money she makes and finds little good to say about U.S. capitalism and America's working poor in terms of low income housing and wages. Ehrenreich's hunt for adequate housing is mind-boggling. I will never buy fast food or walk into Wal-Mart without thinking about this book.

As a teacher, after reading *Nickel and Dimed*, I wonder how many of my students are facing the same difficulties: living in a car, not meeting the rent, and having little food to eat—and fast food at that. Yet one thinks of the students' cell phones. Students need a cell phone because, when they are trying to get a job, an employer has to be able to reach them, as Ehrenreich points out. Then the student has to use the phone to make an appointment for the costly drug test (apparently mandatory in most menial jobs). Also, one realizes from the book how many people have to hold down two jobs in order to pay for the basics, let alone the extras. And there is precious little time for long assignments and extensive reading. A teacher's mind visualizes the ideal student. But most times, that student does not exist. What exists are guys and gals being paid the minimum wage, trying to pay for college or books, and sometimes day care, and trying to "do the almost impossible": becoming an A or B student. It's a tough life.



Another good reason for reading the book is from the standpoint of being a journalist. The author goes "undercover" in order to walk in another's shoes and be able to write honestly about what she faces as a low income person. In terms of history, sociology, and economics, the book also shows how the U.S. economy favors the rich and what poverty is really like. ❖

March/April 2006 CTL Workshop Topics

Basic Statistics - Cosponsored with Rockville Math Department

"Compass:" Keeping Your Students On Course

Commenting on Your Students' Papers in Word

Create a Virtual Field Trip for Your Students

MyMC Course Tools

Pedagogy and Podcasting

Podcasts and Your Class

Teaching from the Heart, Series I and II

For more information or to register visit
[http://www.montgomerycollege.edu/ctl/workshops/
workshop.htm](http://www.montgomerycollege.edu/ctl/workshops/workshop.htm)

(Interested and Inspired, from page 1)

Reynolds was later joined in his crusade to pass the law by Mark Klaas, whose daughter, 12-year-old Polly Klaas, was abducted from her home in 1993 by Richard Allen Davis, a multi-convicted rapist released from prison, apparently because of over-crowding. The discovery of her body two months later led Mark Klaas to enter the spotlight at first as a supporter of the Three Strikes Law, but then to rescind his agreement to allow Polly's picture and name to be associated with the proposal. Her face and age provided the perfect illustration of the value of mandatory life sentences for violent offenders; no doubt she would be alive today, or at least not dead because of Richard Allen Davis, if Davis had been given a life sentence after his second conviction, or third "strike." When Mark Klaas realized that the law, as written, would adversely affect all repeat NON-VIOLENT offenders as well, he became its greatest opponent. However, the Three Strikes metaphor had so captured lawmakers' attention that state after state rushed to enact legislation.

For this topic, an actual students' thesis sentence/blueprint suggestion could be *Mandatory sentencing to life without parole for repeat, violent criminals, if they have two convictions and commit a third crime, a) takes them off the street for the rest of their lives, b) prevents further injury to society, and c) ensures justice.*

GROUP 2

The "Twinkie" Defense (Twinkies have so much sugar that the defendant is thrown into an altered state and thus "not responsible" for criminal activities, extrapolated to include various drugs, alcohol, etc.) or "diminished capacity" is illustrated in a landmark civil case against the Eli Lilly Drug Company to seek damages for several fatalities and injuries in the workplace by a man on a number of medications, including Prozac, made by Lilly. The shooter killed himself, which made justice through the criminal courts impossible. Evidence presented by the plaintiffs reflected that the employer/workplace administration KNEW the killer had serious mental problems & had made threats but did nothing to prevent his rampage.

The students did a good job discussing WHY the Prozac/Zoloft/Sinus Medication/Twinkie plea usually fails: **as a society, we do value personal responsibility and accountability.** One student did a little research and found that an adult used Zoloft as a defense for beating a 65-year-old woman to death and setting her body on fire in a nearby field. This grisly depiction had fellow students cringing and scowling. The jury did not award damages to the plaintiffs because they found the Lilly Company not liable for the killer's actions.

For this topic, a sample thesis sentence/blueprint suggestion could be *Our theory of personal responsibility negates the defense of blaming prescription drugs, street drugs, and/or too much sugar for criminal acts.*

I do have to say, with these rather dark vehicles of discussion, our in-class, Writing Center-planning/drafting sessions were somewhat whimsical; our resident, self-described "Surfer Dude," filled in his PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS categories with Superman, Batman, and Spiderman, and after our sisterhood protests, Wonder Woman, on the topic of Elements of Justice. So I'm not worried that they should take this too seriously! ❖

Technology Exposition!

Mark your calendars! An exposition of technology faculty can use in teaching – both online and in traditional classes – is scheduled for April 25 (Theatre Arts, Rockville).
More information to follow.

(Sponsored by the Office of Distance Education, with help from the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Office of Information Technology, and Sungard/Collegis.)



Guidelines for Contributions to

Focus on Faculty

The deadline for submitting articles for the next issue of *Focus on Faculty* is March 27, 2006. Please submit your article(s) of no more than 800 words in Microsoft Word to:

Bryant Davis, 134 Humanities (Germantown Campus)
or
bryant.davis@montgomerycollege.edu

This publication was produced by Kim Emery and Bryant Davis for the Center for Teaching and Learning.