



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Hotel D, 24 East Range * (434) 982-2815 * trc-uva@virginia.edu * <http://trc.virginia.edu>

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Making Every Lecture Your Last

Kirk Martini, Associate Professor of Architecture,
University of Virginia

It's not often that a middle-aged professor sharply changes perspective on teaching. For me, it took a combination of inspiration and shock. The inspiration came from my long-ago mentor Randy Pausch, and his well-known Last Lecture. If you don't know about that lecture, here's a brief recap: after explaining he has terminal cancer with only a few months to live, a witty and animated 46-year-old professor of computer science from Carnegie Mellon talks about his experience and views on how to live life fully. His intent was simply to leave a record for his three small children to understand who he was and what he stood for, but the web-cast also led to major coverage in the national media. The impact of Randy's inspiration for me was influenced by a shock I experienced a few weeks before the lecture. To explain the combined effect, let me tell the story of each.

I was hired in 1992 by the architecture department at the University of Virginia under unusual circumstances: the initial contract was for one year, and the interview was entirely by phone and fax (I was at the end of an overseas post-doc, and they needed to hire someone in a hurry). I first set foot in Charlottesville four weeks before the start of classes, not knowing a soul. Since I was a computer guy, my chair recommended that I meet Randy Pausch in computer science, because some architecture students had been working with him. Meeting Randy, I was instantly dazzled by the energy that surrounded him and the swarm of students working in his lab.

The following year I received a Lilly Teaching Fellowship, a program aimed at developing the

teaching and career skills of junior faculty through workshops, mentoring, and support in applying innovative teaching methods. Each fellow selects a mentor, typically an established senior faculty member. I asked Randy to be my mentor even though he was two years younger than me and had received tenure only a year before. I knew I could learn a lot from this guy.

And I did. We attended each other's lectures, had lunches, and went to dinners with the other teaching fellows. In total, it wasn't that much time, but every conversation orbited tightly around one question: What was my strategy for getting tenure? Not just how to teach and what to publish, but how to deal with people, situations, time management, everything. Having lunch with Randy then was not a great way to unwind. His job was to be my mentor, and he attacked it with the same intensity he did everything else. He dropped many pearls of wisdom, but he also fired a lot of pointed questions, and I did my share of squirming when my answers were weak.

During that year, Randy did more to shape my approach to academic life than any other person ever has. A dozen years later, I still find myself quoting Randy in conversations about teaching ("When you put a question to a class, and they wait in silence until you answer it, then they've trained you."), or when I give advice to junior faculty ("When your chair casually suggests you do something, like 'maybe you should try this' or 'perhaps you should think about that', visualize a cattle prod."). I didn't see Randy much after that. The next year he took his sabbatical at Disney, and a semester after that he returned to Carnegie Mellon.

Moving ahead a decade to the fall of 2006, I was stunned to hear of Randy's diagnosis with

pancreatic cancer. Like many others, I regularly checked his cancer update web page, through the low points of chemotherapy in the winter, and the hopeful recovery through the spring into summer. Then in late August, the worst news came. That was a bad week, but not only because of Randy, which brings me to the second story.

The same week I heard that Randy's condition was terminal, three people I knew were killed in a car accident. The three were a 9-year-old girl, her 12-year-old sister, and their mother. I knew the girls from teaching aikido: a Japanese martial art that I have practiced for several years, and for many of those years I taught classes for children. In addition to its physical side, aikido has a philosophical side, about responding gracefully to aggressive energy. It completely exposes your personality. Practicing with someone every week, you see facets you never would in a conventional setting. I spent an hour a week for three years with those girls. Over that time, their distinct personalities and sweet souls impressed me deeply.

The girls and their mother were driving home on a sunny Thursday afternoon in August, with about a mile left to go. They were waiting to turn left onto the rural road where they lived. Behind them, a truck driver had fallen asleep at the wheel. The truck rammed them at full speed, killing the girls instantly. Their mother died an hour later. It was a shocking reminder on top of Randy's condition that death can strike anyone at anytime.

Three weeks later, shortly after Randy's lecture, the two stories came together. In a quiet moment one afternoon, I wondered "What would my Last Lecture be?" Disturbingly direct, my mind spontaneously replied "Well, if you're killed in traffic on the way home today, your 'Last Lecture' will be the one you gave this morning."

That stark observation raised a challenging question: If that morning's lecture were videotaped and broadcast on the internet, would people be able to understand who I was and what I stood for, in the way they could understand Randy from his lecture? Mercifully, I didn't have a video of that morning's lecture, but thinking about the proposition made me realize that I should aspire to that, to have every lecture clearly demonstrate my beliefs and values. Every lecture can't explicitly

state and explain those beliefs, as Randy's did, but it can demonstrate them. I realized how many things in a lecture show values: how I pose a difficult question; how I respond to a question when I don't know the answer; how I respond to an interruption or an equipment breakdown; how I respond to an overly persistent questioner; the attitude I convey toward the material. Every action speaks.

It's a daunting challenge: to teach in every lecture so that it could stand as a Last Lecture. I would be careful about putting that challenge to someone too early in a teaching career because it could generate a lot of self-consciousness. But for middle-aged professors like me, I think it's fair. I'm certain pursuing it will fully occupy the rest of my career.