

“Teaching and Learning in the ‘Real World,’ Trespassers Welcome”

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I recognized Ms. Pracklett by the back of her head. The sight of her short, curly blond hair over the top of the produce display flip-flopped my stomach. I felt somewhat star struck but mostly nauseous. I refused to believe. My fourth-grade mind unable to figure out how my favorite teacher in the whole entire universe, the Beautiful, Smart, Funny, Nice Ms. Pracklett could stand within ten feet of me and look at onions? I hated onions. I felt overwhelmed by the intoxicating combination of overripe fruit and Ms. Pracklett. I can’t remember specifically how I broke free from her spell. Undoubtedly my grandfather extracted my narrow body from between two crates of gnatty bananas and shooed me out to the car.

As a young professional who resides and recreates in the neighborhood where my campus is located, I regularly contend with what I refer to as “real world[†]” Sightings. Some of the Sightings, like those while produce shopping for example, play out expectedly pleasant and without consequence. Others, like those that might occur at a local bar or nightclub, present greater challenges. Depending on the context of the encounter and the relationship I have with the student, some substantial teaching and learning has resulted from what began as an ordinary “real world” Sighting.

Not long ago, while out at a neighborhood club with some friends, a former student rushed up to me on the dance floor. He hugged me and screamed in my ear, “I really, really loved your class so, so much, and learned so much, and... Wow, you really look great, and this is my friend so and so, and...” I screamed back, “Thank you!” Then I sashayed myself right off the dance floor. The student, clearly enthusiastic about his experience in my class and thrilled about

[†] For the purposes of this piece, I adopted the popular term “real world.” Many students and educators use this term to describe life outside of the college experience. Others, myself included, believe college life to be quite real indeed.

my choice of outfit, spotted me out in the “real world” and went a little nutty. Not so unlike my becoming freakishly unnerved after spotting my fourth-grade teacher at the grocery store.

The following Monday morning found me sitting in my office suffering from a low-lying feeling of angst. As I waited for the student to appear at my office (I knew he would), I confess to running through all of the impossible responses to his ribbing such as getting angry or merely laughing it off. Sure enough, the student came strolling in like he had a Big Secret. “I saw you out on Friday night. Ha, ha.” He went on, “Wow, you looked like you were *really* having a good time, (wink, wink)... I didn’t know you liked to kick it like that. We should hang out sometime?!” For a fleeting moment, the student forgot I was his instructor and saw me as a potential buddy, some one with whom he could “kick it.”

I approached the conversation with the goal of converting the student’s imprudence into a teachable moment. By gently guiding the student back to the nature of our relationship, educator-student, I helped him recognize the value of us having a meaningful relationship based on our shared commitment to his success as a student. I also offered him a glimpse into my life to make it clear that being an instructor is just one aspect of my complete identity. An obvious truth, yet easily forgotten. During the conversation, I made sure not to demonstrate any feelings of shame for going out and having a good time. However, in the end I still felt it necessary to ask the student to use good sense when talking about the Sighting.

Due to the nature of our role as Student Affairs professionals, our advisees and protégées interact with us in a variety of non-traditional educational environments e.g. group meetings, programs, and social activities. In these settings, educators and students co-author experiences, knowledge, and beliefs. As we teach and learn from each other, we share many responsibilities including safeguarding and respecting each other’s reputations as associates.

At the end of the conversation I said, “It’s nice to be able to go out and have a good time on the weekend. I know finding a healthy balance between work and play is definitely difficult. I’m glad you have found a way to decompress after a long week of schoolwork and other responsibilities.” He said, “You too.” “Yep, me too,” I replied.

Another noteworthy Sighting-converted-into-a-teachable-moment happened recently after a mid-day coffee date with a new suitor. At the end of the date, my new friend offered to walk me back to work. I accepted with the understanding that we would take the “back way” to avoid potential encounters with students. When we arrived at the side of my building, feeling seized by the moment, my date swept me into an impassioned embrace. While comfortably settling into the hug I glanced over his shoulder and spotted a small gaggle of students coming back from lunch. Gawking and nudging can be so telling. For his sake I pretended not to notice. Yet, their devilish giggles assured me that I would soon be thrust into some else’s ridiculous adolescent flashback. Having never dated in high school, I was unaccustomed to being teased about a would-be boyfriend. So when they asked me questions like, “Who was that? Have you been dating long? Do you like him?” I responded with a simple, “None of your bee’s wax.”

Fortunately after a few days the novelty of the Sighting wore off. The teasing abated. One of the spectators visited my office. She sat down beside my desk and with a serious tone in her voice said, “I’m sorry about that business with your friend. I know it was immature and stupid. I hope we didn’t ruin your date.” I replied in an equally serious tone, “I accept your apology and forgive you.” She looked relieved. After an interlude of casual conversation she asked, “So, have you seen him again?” I replied, “I forgive you for that question too.”

I can’t help but imagine other opportunities to turn Sightings into teachable moments. For example, what if I’m not out as a lesbian on my campus and a Questioning student sees me

at a local gay bar with a woman? Would that student then seek me out as an ally or mentor? How would I respond? Or say I'm at an event where I'm speaking Spanish and celebrating my Latino heritage. I see a student, who like me doesn't "look" Latino, and is currently moving through her own ethnic identity development as a Latina. Will that student begin to count me as a role model? Would I welcome her?

I cannot predict my exact response to these scenarios with any certainty. I can only assert myself as a Student Affairs professional who believes in the potential for deep learning through the translation of every "real world" Sighting into a teachable moment. Exhibiting denial or shame, simply laughing it off, or getting embarrassed or angry deeply betrays the potential of any teachable moment. Instead of treating a Sighting as a trespass into our "real world" lives, we must own up to it even in the most unexpected circumstances and inconvenient times.

According to Constructivist learning theory, the outcomes of learning are wide-ranging and frequently unpredictable. Learners are the main builders of their knowledge; personally instilling each experience with meaning. In other words, Student Affairs professionals work best when we provide fewer answers and do not advocate our own truths as universal. The privilege of our status as "real world" educators allows us to help students access relevant experiences, then guide critical reflection, and finally encourage healthy personal development as our students move from one new experience to the next.

At times, especially when the student's "real world" collides with ours, the potential for conflict, disillusionment, and confusion become quite real. In these moments we have the potential to do some of our best teaching. We can provide the student a safe emotional space to stand elbows deep in the discomfort of their indiscretions or poor decisions. As educators it is

not our business to always show students the easy way out of the emotional quagmire that is profound learning. It is our business to provide a good balance between support and challenge.

Support means gracefully accepting an apology, not holding a grudge or withholding affection, and resuming your relationship with the same attention as before. Challenge being pointing out the inappropriateness of the offending behavior followed by not making a huge deal of a merited apology. Depending on where the student resides developmentally, this approach could lead to considerable learning. For example, just allowing a student to apologize (like I did with the student who teased me about my would-be boyfriend) without accepting it too quickly challenged her to behave maturely even when she felt ashamed. This difficult challenge could only transform into learning because it was conscientiously followed-up with predictable supportive behavior.

Our willingness to meet students where they reside stands out as one of the most unique and truly admirable characteristics of our work as Student Affairs professionals. On our best days, we recognize and accept the tremendous responsibility we have in the lives of the students we serve. We can then gently and selectively disclose bits and pieces our own stories. We hope our courage, generosity of spirit, and unselfishness will help students connect to us as advisors and mentors, to each other as peers and friends, and ultimately to the “real world” beyond campus.

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