

Keynote Address

***Good Teaching Matters, Teachers Matter, and Teacher Education Matters***

Address by Lynn Melby Gordon, Ph.D.

Student Teaching Reception  
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Abstract

This paper was the keynote address at the June 6, 2012 Occidental College completion ceremony for new teachers completing their teacher credential program. This occasion was momentous because it was the final new teacher graduation that Occidental College would hold, due to the previously announced closure of the teacher preparation program by the college president and trustees. Dr. Lynn Melby Gordon spoke on the following topics, (1) good teaching matters, (2) teachers matter, and (3) good teacher education matters. The author reviewed research findings from teacher effectiveness research, profiled some notable Occidental College education professors and other teachers, and discussed Occidental College's long and distinguished history of producing outstanding teachers.

*Keywords:* keynote, teacher effectiveness, teacher education, teacher influence, Occidental College

Jill Asbjornsen, president of the board of ALOED, introduced the speaker:

Lynn Melby Gordon is a full-time tenured associate professor in the Department of Elementary Education at California State University, Northridge, where she has been teaching for sixteen years. At Cal State Northridge, Dr. Gordon teaches reading methods courses and the educational psychology or foundations course. She earned her BA from Occidental in 1980 and a teaching credential and master's degree in Education from Occidental College the following year, in 1981. She earned her Ph.D. in Education from UCLA in 1995. Lynn is the founder and chair of the International Reading Association's Phonics Special Interest Group and has also served on the board of ALOED, our Oxy alumni group in education. She has been the recipient of a variety of awards, grants, and honors including a UCLA alumni award for excellence in scholarship and contribution to the field of education, and Occidental College ALOED certificate for outstanding service and leadership in the field of education, and an LAUSD Teamwork Award for dedication to student achievement through volunteerism. Her book on phonics was published by Scholastic in 2009.

*This is a summary of Dr. Lynn Melby Gordon's remarks.  
Summary was provided by Dr. Gordon and produced from her notes.*

Thank you for inviting me to here with you today. This is a beautiful day in southern California, a gorgeous setting, and a lovely, happy occasion, as we celebrate with these new teachers who have completed their teaching credential program. This is also a historic and solemn occasion because today will be the last graduation, actually the last completion ceremony for teaching credential students here at Occidental College. Our fine college has made the stunning decision to close this illustrious teacher preparation program.

New teachers, your family and friends and master teachers and professors are here to congratulate you and wish you well. We are all so excited for you as you are poised to embark on your teaching career and start making a difference in the lives of your future students. Many of us here are also thinking about the legacy of other good teachers that Occidental has sent forth in previous years and hoping that we can get the program reinstated at some point in the future.

I want to talk about three things today:

1. Good teaching matters
2. Teachers matter
3. Good teacher education matters

## 1. GOOD TEACHING MATTERS

The first point I want to make today is that good teaching matters. A variety of educational reforms have been promoted over the years but highlights from teacher effectiveness research consistently show that the teacher is the most crucial variable affecting student achievement—not the school, not the curriculum, and not the pedagogical method/philosophy/or reform flavor-of-the-year being promoted.

Teacher effectiveness studies show that:

- a) Highly effective teachers are smart. They have deep content area knowledge and excellent verbal skills (elaborate vocabularies). Together these seem to lead to lesson clarity.
- b) Highly effective teachers are well-prepared. They know about lesson design and plan well-structured daily lessons. They have effective time management skills, are masters of student motivation, and know to meet the needs of students with special needs, English learners, struggling readers, other students at risk, as well as high-achievers.
- c) Highly effective teachers possess certain positive background qualifications, sometimes called dispositions, personality attributes, or attitudes. They possess something called high teacher efficacy, a belief in their ability to cause change with students. More effective teachers are also caring, enthusiastic, energetic, have positive attitudes, and high-expectations.
- d) Highly effective teachers have excellent classroom management skills. Although all teachers encounter students with issues and discipline challenges, highly effective teachers know how to get the students on their side, earn their respect, and minimize disruptive behavior. Good classroom management is largely the *result* of the first three factors identified—being smart, well-prepared, and possessing those itemized positive dispositions/attitudes/expectations.

## 2) TEACHERS MATTER

The next point I want to make today is that individual teachers matter on a personal level. We all have one or two very special teachers who, when you look back, you realize really influenced you and made a difference in the kind of person you became. To do this, I would like to share some stories about individual teachers I have had in my life and tell how they influenced me.

a) Those oh-so-important kindergarten and first grade teachers. The thrill of learning to read!

b) Mr. Harold Jacobs, a famous retired algebra teacher and math book author at Grant High School in Van Nuys. He motivated each and every lesson with a vivid real-world example. He made math, which I never felt particularly strong in, easy and fun. From Mr. Jacobs I learned how very important it is to teach math well and how important it is, when teaching any subject, to plan careful, clear lessons that include terrific examples.

c) Dr. Jo Stanchfield at Occidental. The late, great Dr. Stanchfield was such a vibrant, enthusiastic character and fabulous teacher educator. In addition to being one of Occidental's most famous professors of all time, she was the founder of the Occidental College reading clinic—and really taught her students the nuts and bolts of how to teach reading. She taught about the crucial importance of students knowing the sound/symbol correspondence of letters and sounds! She taught us to use puppets to bring kindergarten letter lessons alive and taught about the *auditory discrimination of letter sounds*, which we now call *phonemic awareness*! She taught how to first teach reading comprehension skills explicitly and to then develop the comprehension skills through literature. She taught the importance of teaching with enthusiasm. Dr. Stanchfield's reading methods students had to raise their arms, as if holding torches, and pledge to “Go forth and hold high the torch of literacy!” We learned how to understand human development through the lens of Maslow's Hierararchy of Needs. Dr. Stanchfield had such an amazing commitment to her students and the field of reading. Her credential students all felt “shot out of a cannon” to go forth and, as corny as it sounds, try to change the world, one kid at a time.

d) Wonderful Dr. Rae McCormick and the Occidental Reading Clinic. Such fond memories of working one-on-one with struggling readers and using flannel board stories and puppets to teach comprehension skills through literature at the Reading Clinic. Rae McCormick reinforced the importance of reading aloud to each child as part of each tutoring session. And word work. She taught about the importance of planning customized lessons to reach each child's individual needs.

e) Dynamic Dr. Norm Olsen at Oxy. He carefully taught about the components of a lesson plan. Every lesson Dr. Olsen taught was an example of the components of lesson design in action. Dr. Olsen once said, “Maybe one day you'll go to graduate school to get your Ph.D.” He planted a seed (which grew later). That is sometimes what teachers do for us. They plant seeds.

f) Fantastic Mrs. Susie Smith, my third grade student teaching master teacher at Eagle Rock Elementary School—and also a student of Dr. Jo Stanchfield—and Oxy's current student

teaching supervisor. (*Susan Smith was present at the reception and acknowledged with a warm round of applause.*) Susie Smith offered tremendous encouragement and support during student teaching and provided a perfect, organized classroom environment. Table points! The prize box! Mrs. Smith modeled an extremely positive classroom climate. She lovingly taught her students to treat one student in the class who had a developmental delay so very kindly. She demonstrated how to teach expository paragraph development using *Power Writing* technique. She provided space and room to grow. She nurtured my interest in curriculum development: genealogy & book making projects.

### 3) GOOD TEACHER EDUCATION MATTERS.

Finally, I want to talk about how good teacher education matters. Since we know that good teaching is the number one variable affecting student learning, we should want to do whatever it takes to produce more highly effective teachers. What better place to do this than at Occidental? I have to say it—shame on the president and trustees of Occidental College for discontinuing the program.

I want to remind everyone assembled how Occidental College has had a long and distinguished history of producing outstanding teachers and also remind everyone that the college has, in my opinion, an obligation to continue in this role. Occidental College has always had smart students, and that is step one in creating great teachers, to start with highly intelligent people who want to make a difference in the lives of children. Oxy has also always had top-notch professors. Oxy has had a tradition of being a part of the community and sending student teachers out into local schools where they can refine their skills. I was told, years ago at my first teaching position interview, “Oh, we LOVE hiring Oxy grads.”

I call for a commitment from the college to bring back teacher education. And let me explain my position: It is just the principle of the thing; Oxy SHOULD continue to want to produce teachers. Allow me to plead for concerted action from the president, trustees, and policy makers at the college. If money is the problem, find the money. Many of us have pointed out that students pay plenty of tuition at Occidental. Even if teacher education is an expensive or even a slightly unprofitable program, if administrators are focused on money as an issue, it is a poor excuse. It is simply the right thing to do for the college to maintain what has always been a jewel box of a teacher preparation program and to recruit the best and the brightest into teaching. I would like to issue an invitation to all those present to continue to pester, question, and write letters to the president and trustees of Occidental College and to urge them to bring back teacher education at Oxy.

### CONCLUSION

I'm holding up a copy of Dr. Jo Stanchfield's beginning reading curriculum book, *The Lion's Share*, which has been out of print for many, many years. I hunted it down on eBay (after having a two-year search on the title). In conclusion, I would like to read Dr. Stanchfield's *Letter to the Teacher* from the preface:

You, the teacher, hold the key --- the golden key that can open the magic door to the wonderful world of books. The greatest adventure in school, and perhaps in life, is learning to read. You, the teacher, have the privilege of making this adventure a successful and exciting one. Pause for a moment to consider how important you are. Once a child enters kindergarten, the key person in developing his attitude toward school

and reading is you, his teacher. Smile! Accept children as they are and make them feel the worth of their contributions. Be filled with genuine and obvious enthusiasm for children and for teaching. Smile! Capture children's imaginations with materials that stimulate, with an environment that excites curiosity and interest, and with questions that provoke thought. Smile! Teach children to think divergently; encourage them to be independent and to dare to differ. Teach them to think open-mindedly, letting them know that they may be right, but that there may be other answers, too. Smile! One proof of real concern for children is considerate planning for the wisest use of their school time. Important, too, is flexibility in planning and carrying out plans---flexibility in your expectations for children because you realize that no two children learn in exactly the same way, or at the same rate, or with the same stimuli. Good planning is absolutely necessary for optimum learning every day. You may not follow a plan precisely---in fact, unexpected circumstances may arise, making it wise to alter the plan considerably---but if there is no planning there is usually little learning. Smile! Remember and contemplate a few remarks children have made about teachers who smile: My teacher likes me; my teacher smiles. I like my teacher; my teacher smiles. My teacher is pretty; my teacher smiles. I like to go to school; my teacher smiles. School's a happy place; my teacher smiles. Even when I make a mistake, my teacher smiles. (Stanchfield, 1973)

Remember, new teachers:

- You make a difference.
- Go forth and change the world, one kid at a time.
- Teaching is a noble profession.
- If you're going to be a kindergarten or first grade teacher, remember to start with phonics. Teach those letter sounds, especially to the short vowel sounds, and teach them how to blend, and they'll be on the road to reading.
- As Dr. Stanchfield taught, "Go forth and hold high the torch of literacy!"
- Stay in touch with ALOED and help us bring back teacher education at Oxy.
- Finally, here is a quote from Mahatma Ghandi: "Be the change you wish to see in the world"

## References

Stanchfield, J. (1973). *The Lion's Share*. San Rafael, CA: Leswing Press.