

Sheedy Award Address 2025

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That was unexceeded, but beautiful. If you watch this sometime, Kevin, thank you. I will also write you a note. Thank you, Ken, and thank you, Jenny. And thank you all for being here today.

There is a nice joke about academics. It goes something like this: “You join another professor for lunch, who immediately and incessantly talks only about himself. After twenty minutes, he pauses and says, ‘Enough about me ... Let me tell you about my work.’ Then after listening to him pour forth for another twenty minutes, you finally hear, ‘OK. Enough about my work ... Let me tell you what others are saying about my work.’” The joke hits home, especially as I embark on a partly autobiographical address, though I hope that at times trading stories of failures and successes can be interesting and helpful, perhaps most especially in teaching, which we all have in common.

When I interview faculty candidates and explore their teaching, I sometimes ask, “Who was your best teacher, and why?” Already the smiles, as candidates think through their answers, reveal a great deal. I have had too many wonderful teachers to thank here today, so let me, synecdochically, name three: at Williams historian Frank Oakley embodied for me the ideal integration of teaching, research, and leadership; in Tübingen philosopher Dieter Wandschneider taught me to truly linger over textual details without, however, losing the broader horizon; and Germanist Stanley Corngold of Princeton welcomed disagreement into the classroom in a way that was exciting and enriching. None of them distinguished between classroom, corridor, or café: *Bildung* was always available.

When as dean I would come home and be in an especially good mood, my wife would sometimes say, “You taught today, didn’t you?” She could tell that being around students and engaging literature and ideas as opposed to dealing with administrative issues brought a different kind of joy. My wife experienced many great teachers at Bowdoin and at NYU’s Stern School of Business, which has made her understanding and supportive of how devoted I am to teaching, for which I am immensely grateful.

On the first day of my own discussion classes, I often break the students into small groups and ask them to identify the characteristics of the best and worst seminar classes they ever had or could imagine. After some animated and amusing discussion, I put their findings on the board. For every item listed, I then ask who is responsible. The goal of the exercise is to articulate our normative ideal, weigh how we might fail or succeed, and help students recognize that they bear considerable responsibility for the success of the class. My obligation as a teacher, it turns out, is to choose a fascinating topic and great texts and to hold back from speaking too much. The students are responsible for everything else; in that spirit I want to thank my students for whatever passes as my good teaching.

Having read many Arts and Letters promotion and tenure files, I know that we have an overabundance of great teachers, which leads me to conclude that faculty awards are not simply about a recipient; they are likewise attributable to a generous, hardworking chairperson who has a strong sense of collective identity, undertakes the initiative to nominate a colleague, and takes joy

in the success of others. Tobias Boes is such a person; I suspect that he had a considerable hand in this process, so I thank him deeply.

I want to do two things in this address. First, I want to extend my thanks to all of you by celebrating, as Ken and Kevin already have, our distinctive culture of teaching. Second, I want to share some ideas I have picked up along the way, in many cases thanks to conversations with colleagues in this room.

I

A previous Notre Dame provost once asked me to speak with a decanal finalist in another college. The candidate asked me what made Notre Dame distinctive, so I spoke about our triadic identity as a residential liberal arts college with a strong emphasis on student learning, an increasingly dynamic and ambitious research university, and a Catholic institution of international standing. After I began to elaborate on the first element, the candidate interrupted me to say that he had never heard an administrator at Princeton talk that way about teaching. I took his comment to be hyperbolic, but it nonetheless made an impression on me. And I recalled a conversation years earlier when a Yale doctorate shared with me the counsel of his advisor, whom I otherwise admired: “Teach well enough that you don’t get in trouble. Nothing more. Research is what matters.”

I understood this ethos, but I did not support it. In fact, to ensure that teaching would not be overlooked here, I began every promotion and tenure letter with teaching. When I met with chairpersons to discuss faculty members, we always did holistic evaluations. Shortly after I became dean, the Boyer Report on undergraduate learning at research universities was published. I arranged three open faculty discussions of the report and its potential impact on our work; dozens of faculty came to each meeting. The vigorous discussions led to our raising significant funds for undergraduate research and creating honors tracks in all departments. When I served as dean, I regularly invited small groups of faculty to lunch. Colleagues were free to offer any advice, ask any question, or engage any issue; as the hour progressed, the conversation often turned toward common puzzles and best practices in teaching.

I came into an atmosphere that had already elevated teaching—perhaps because of our being late to research, perhaps because of our extraordinary alumni support, perhaps because of the Catholic ideal of educating the whole person, perhaps because of the kind of faculty member we draw to Notre Dame. In any case, the culture that elevated teaching predated me. And it was inspiring. The Sheedy Award, now over 50 years old, is an example of this. In my first weeks as dean, I received a review of the Honors Program. Neil Delaney, a Sheedy recipient, and David Lodge of Science, spelled out the program’s appeal, and we expanded it immediately, over time endowing it, thanks to the generosity of John and Barbara Glynn, and eventually giving more than 100 students per year intensive year-long seminars, summer learning opportunities, and a track to an honors thesis. Our eagerness to help students reach their potential also led to our creation of the Center for the Study of Languages and Cultures, with its two signature undergraduate programs: summer language abroad grants and peer tutoring.

We created the College Seminar to help students develop their capacities in the back-and-forth of intensive seminar discussions and high-stakes interviews, where intellectual agility and

articulate precision are prized and where we had recognized a gap. We were willing to innovate on behalf of our students, and we were ahead of our time in crafting a course remarkably resistant to AI whenever it is taught in its original spirit, that is, with at least two thirds of the grades based on seminar discussions and oral exams (as opposed to oral presentations). We have good reason to celebrate this culture.

II

When I was a graduate student at Princeton, those of us teaching German shared an office in the attic of East Pyne Hall. Our pedagogy training had consisted of a single meeting. So we learned how to teach by thinking out loud with one another, and I have continued to do that since. In that spirit, I want to share a few practices that come partly from my own trial-and-error and partly from the good ideas of colleagues. I do so fully aware that teaching is more like beauty than truth: that is, one effective teaching practice does not exclude the viability of diametrically opposed approaches.

When I was an assistant professor at Ohio State, I was working at home one morning. My afternoon graduate seminar was to begin at 3:00. The phone rang around 11:00. It was a senior faculty member, who told me that he would like to visit (and evaluate) that day's graduate class. Although I had done some preparatory reading over the weekend, I had cut my serious and focused preparation a bit tight, but I said, "Of course," and immediately started intensive preparation for that day's class. Five minutes later the phone rang again. It was my wife. We were trying to sell our house to buy a farm in the country, where we could keep our two horses. She told me that a prospective buyer would be visiting the house that day at 5:30. She would leave work early to meet the realtor and potential buyer, but I would need to spend a few hours cleaning the house. I spent the next hours not preparing for class but cleaning, and I came to class as unprepared as I had ever been in my life.

It was one of the best classes I ever taught. How could that be? Ironically, because I had so little to offer, I spent the entire three hours pulling things out of the students and the works, asking the students one question after another, leading them to see a rich world in the two complex poems by Friedrich Hölderlin that were the subject of the class. Granted, I could draw on some previous knowledge, but because I was not really prepared, I had to be 100% attuned to what the students could bring to the discussion. I also let them speak more than I usually did. I was a bit surprised myself that the class worked, but over time I realized that attending to the material and the students matters more than offering whatever perspectives I might have prepared.

When I arrived at Notre Dame, the Kaneb Center was in its first weeks of existence, and a workshop was announced with the title, "Teaching Well, Saving Time." For a researcher who values teaching, the topic drew me in; the main lesson was that student learning comes more from what students do than from how much you prepare for each class. I remember my partner in our activities was a young professor of philosophy named John Jenkins. That seminar changed my teaching. I had always valued knowing the material and caring about the students, but I had not given much thought to student learning goals or to basic educational principles, such as active learning.

Almost a decade later I attended an inspiring Kaneb lecture by Ken Bain, who suggested that we grab our students on the first page of the syllabus and the first day of class—by making clear that we will be exploring intriguing, beautiful, and important questions and that the course could well change how students think and how they see the world. When I teach a CSEM on “Faith, Doubt, and Reason,” this pitch is not difficult, but with all my classes I try to foreground intellectual excitement, curiosity, and wonder. I talk first about the promise of the course; the requirements come later.

I orchestrate my classes according to a dozen or so principles that I put front and center on the syllabus, with a brief rationale and their implications for the course design. For example, one principle involves high expectations and feedback. Students learn the most when we have high academic expectations of them and when they receive helpful feedback that supports them in their quest to meet those high expectations. An easy A does not help students in the long run, and unless the standards are set high, students might not stretch as far as they could otherwise. But they also need feedback to recognize to what extent they are not yet what they could and should be.

Another principle is effortful learning. Easier learning is superficial and quickly forgotten; effortful learning, in contrast, leads to deeper and more durable learning as well as greater mastery and better applications. Trying to solve a problem before being offered a solution leads to better learning. Making mistakes and correcting them, is not wasted effort but important work. Difficulties are desirable: the harder the effort, the greater the benefit. For this reason, I make students work hard in thinking through puzzles instead of simply giving them the answers I have developed.

When after the first year of the CSEM, we had a collegial discussion about the course, I noticed that while for most of my colleagues student time was quite low, in my case it was in the 99th percentile. To speak well, I thought, students must first think and write well, so I required one to two pages of writing for every session. I have since backed off slightly, but in advance of each class I still give students a dozen or so study questions that guide them to central passages or puzzles and push them to think deeply. The students then post their own thoughts to a discussion board, where they can also read their classmates’ posts.

At the start of almost every class, whether it is a small German class of eight or a philosophy and film class of more than 30, I have students break into small groups to discuss targeted questions. I visit the groups, push the students, ask questions, hear where they are—and only then do we begin a general discussion. The small discussion groups get everyone speaking, the students learn from one another, and even if they do not share what they discussed, the discussions have a certain intrinsic value. To make the collective discussion work, I need to hold back at times but be 100% attentive. I used to lecture to 50 students at Ohio State in a course I taught again and again, and at times I could almost go on autopilot. That is not possible in an intense student-centered discussion class, nor can any student step away from their concentrated focus on the discussion.

In Honors Humanities Seminars and CSEMs, I lead the first dozen sessions, introducing relevant concepts for interpreting works and modeling what I think a good discussion leader should do. Then I have each student co-lead two discussions, always with a different partner. They learn immeasurably through this peer activity. In terms of creativity, they exceed my

capacities. If the sessions are truly successful and on point, I raise my hand, like the students do, and when I speak, I try to bring several threads together and add some new angles. When needed, I can intervene at any moment, such that hermeneutic errors or misleading conceptual formulations do not go uncontested or so that central passages or ideas are not overlooked, but even that does not mean moving to a lecture format. I sometimes start the next class (before turning it over to the students) by briefly returning to key passages or concepts that may not have been explored as deeply as would be ideal. The structure is good for active learning and peer learning, and students tend to appreciate it. Years ago, when we surveyed students and faculty about the Core Course, the predecessor to the CSEM, we asked “Was the majority of class time devoted to lecture or to discussion?” The faculty members said it was mainly discussion, whereas the students said it was mainly lecture. Co-led student discussions are unmistakably mainly discussion.

It took me many years to realize that I could mentor students more effectively by requiring them to visit me early in the semester. It costs me a few additional advising hours, but it pays dividends in connecting with students. I ask them a series of questions ranging from “Why did you choose Notre Dame?” to “What do you want most out of college?” For my German students, one of the most important questions is: “What are you doing this summer?” I want to get them abroad. The more I know about my students, the more I can motivate and mentor them as well as ensure connections between our discussions and their other interests, so that their learning is more integrative.

In the year-long Honors Humanities Seminar and the CSEM, I give the students feedback four times a semester, both on their Canvas contributions and on their classroom contributions. These range from praise for specific comments and diverse kinds of contributions to suggested strategies for improvement and the recommendation that they overcome their use of filler words, such as “like,” “you know,” or “um.” I come to every class with a list of first names in alphabetical order and jot down feedback, which I later dictate to my computer. Whenever students co-lead discussions, I can jot down much more.

The CSEM opened my eyes to the value of oral exams, such that I now give them in most of my classes. I schedule the individual students for 30-minute slots, but the exams last only 20 minutes. I then spend 10 minutes dictating (and polishing) feedback. In an oral exam, one really sees whether the student can work with the material. German students receive individualized and detailed feedback not only on ideas but also on pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar as well as tips for further study. After hundreds of these, I have found it relatively easy to gather and process feedback and even to identify an appropriate grade. In the best exams, we are engaged in deep and enjoyable intellectual discussions.

I tend to be hard on students. In articulating grading guidelines, I always begin with a B, and a good student might conclude, ‘Well, if I do really well in this class, I could get a B.’ In my last philosophy class, with 33 students, I gave three A’s. In Honors, many students receive grades for their first papers that they have never seen before, but they learn by rewriting their papers. I want them to raise their sights for their own work.

In my German classes I stumbled upon the idea of putting previous student sentences on the DocCam and asking them to identify the grammar problems. To a degree that has surprised me, students love this exercise. I ask, should we do a few sentences and always get a resounding

yes. It is more fun than a dry grammar exercise but serves the same purpose. I make them labor over the sentences (if no one knows the answer), so that their learning is more effortful. Since then I regularly put student sentences on the DocCam also in Honors. Students want to be tested on their ability to identify dangling modifiers, strings of prepositional phrases, and lack of grammatical parallelism; to address the puzzle of commas in relation to restrictive versus non-restrictive appositives and clauses; and to rewrite awkward sentences.

At midterm I often gather feedback, asking students what they have learned thus far, what has helped them learn, and what changes they would recommend to enhance their learning. In one class a student suggested another layer of feedback—peer feedback. As a result, my Honors and CSEM students now receive anonymous peer feedback that amounts to more than a dozen sentences of praise and more than a dozen sentences of constructive criticism. Recurring comments can help guide students, and in some cases, peers observe things I overlook.

Another activity that is a great learning opportunity but which costs me little time is a video exercise. The students record themselves in groups of two or three engaged in conversation on the works, ideally in the form of practice oral exams. They then watch the video and submit a written analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, both ideas and performance. Before I give the assignment, I explain its benefits, and ensure they are all on board. Each semester it turns out to be a meaningful investment of student time.

Earlier in my teaching career I always tried to pack as much as I could into every course. Over time I replaced some material with what I call consolidation of learning sessions. I first did this in a philosophy and film class, where I added at the end of each of three thematic sections an extra class where we could go deeper into the issues raised and revisit some film scenes, textual puzzles, and arguments. Even when consolidation of learning sessions don't conclude a sequence of classes, they can be useful, as students assess what they have learned thus far, draw connections between works, and experiment with possible oral exam questions. The research shows that such strategies aid learning more than simply racing ahead with more material. And it is another way to teach well and save time. In terms of preparation both student and teacher get a break.

For years I rescheduled my classes whenever I gave talks elsewhere. Now I have students meet without me. I call these peer learning days and give them an elaborate set of fun but also ambitious intellectual exercises to do in groups of two or three. For example: Identify your five favorite Hitchcock films, articulate your criteria, and explain how these works stand out to you. Or: You are heading home after the end of the semester, and the person in the seat next to you begins chatting. You tell them that you just had a Hitchcock course. The person asks: What makes Hitchcock so good or distinctive? What do you answer? I give the students more questions than they can complete in 75 minutes, so as to ensure they stay on task the entire time and so that they can choose among questions. For the students these become among their favorite experiences.

When I taught "Masterpieces of German Cinema," I included Fritz Lang's *M* and was unsure whether to include a second Lang film; in the end I punted. I left four sessions open, with a list of possible films, and had the students choose. That worked well, and now I do it whenever it makes sense. In my Hitchcock course, students did serious research to weigh which films to include in the six sessions I left open. In my College Seminar on "Faith, Doubt, and Reason," I

have sometimes been taken aback by student preferences, but every time they have worked. Choices like this add to existential engagement, which aids learning.

When I first started listing not course goals (what I would cover) but learning goals (what students should learn), I decided to include among the goals the development of certain intellectual virtues. After all, to listen carefully to the views of others and to weigh them fairly, even if they should contradict your initial inclinations, is to practice a form of justice. To encourage effectively the participation of others and successfully draw good ideas out of them is to exhibit intellectual hospitality. To challenge the views of interlocutors without making the attack personal and thus without drawing their eyes away from the search for truth is to practice diplomacy. My feedback to students sometimes encourages them to work on one or another virtue.

All these practices stem from basic principles, conversations with colleagues, or my own stumbling upon an idea. I end with an AI-motivated example. This semester, for the first time in over 40 years of teaching, I devoted in-class time to writing exercises for which my German students could not draw on any external aids. Simply thinking through exam questions can be a form of learning, so I thought having students address some complex puzzles could be a useful exercise, even if it reduced class time. In the first such exercise, half the class did very well, and the other half was below a B. I then cooked up this idea. Those below a B had the opportunity to lift their grade by half a unit if they counted up the different kinds of mistakes they made—gender, case, verb form, endings, word order, etc.—and then prepared a cascading chart, from high to low, of the number of times they made each type of mistake. It was a mundane idea but a great learning opportunity, which is the phrase I use more often than any other in my teaching. And it also involved, teaching well, saving time, as the students did the work. Thank you.