

Chapter Three

Froebel and the Firefly Legacies of Excellence in Teaching

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Excellence in teaching is a complex process that is not easily measured quantitatively. In 2008, as a result of a Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) grant, six professors met to explore that topic. In the spirit of the Lesley mission and in light of the Lesley Centennial, we not only shared narratives of “teachable moments” as exemplars of unexpected instances in which our interactions with students led to special insight and learning, but also investigated our historical roots. Alyssa Pacey, Centennial Archivist at Lesley University, helped us discover the first documented cases of noteworthy graduates, and Celia Morris, a Lesley colleague, helped us craft our narrative. To our profound surprise, we “found” a living legacy, one of the first degree recipients in Lesley College, Lois Zimmerman, or, as she is known when she tells stories, Firefly. This chapter provides a brief summary of, and select quotations from, the six interview sessions conducted by the authors with Lois in May and June of 2009. Personal narratives from the grant participants were transcribed during the grant period. We focused on excellence in teaching and the development of social competency through the themes of empowerment, growth, conflict, active discovery, and the student-centered approach.

We will start with some background on Lois Zimmerman. Twenty-three young women graduated in the Lesley College Class of 1945. Thirteen received diplomas in teaching and another five in home economics. But the real stars of the June 10, 1945, Commencement were the five women who accomplished something new—they earned degrees of Bachelor of Science in Education, the first ever awarded by Lesley College.

Of those five trailblazers, Lois Zimmerman was the most noticeable. She told us whispers were audible as she walked down the aisle to receive her diploma, in a cap and gown, visibly pregnant. Those were still the days when aspiring young teachers were expected to remain unmarried and certainly childless. Lois, born “Loie,” Milton had “willfully” married Donald Zimmerman in December of her senior year, but, as she put it, “I had not expected such quick results.”

Such behavior was not always tolerated at Lesley. As Lois tells it:

The dean and the powers that be had to meet to decide whether they would allow a pregnant student to be at Lesley, because she might teach the other girls things they shouldn’t know. Well, little did they know what some of these girls knew!

Thus it was that Lois Zimmerman completed her degree and marched with her class, perhaps making her doubly a pioneer on that June day.

“I had perished had I not persisted”

The education that Lois Zimmerman and the other four graduates in the class of 1945 received was grounded in Lesley University’s traditional emphasis on experiential learning, which stemmed from the School’s Froebelian roots. As we learned from our research, preserving that tradition has not always been easy.¹ Edith Lesley’s husband, Mr. Wolfard, reported that the motto on the original Lesley School coat of arms was “*perissem ni perstissem*,” which meant “I had perished had I not persisted.” This is an apt motto and Lesley indeed persisted. As teaching became an increasingly academic profession, Lesley continued to develop itself and its mission, while remaining true to its philosophical roots in the work of German pedagogue and kindergarten pioneer, Friedrich Froebel.

During Lesley’s first hundred years, trends toward structured, academic teaching have sometimes conflicted with the original emphasis on spontaneous, experiential learning. Over those years, the growing importance of obtaining academic degrees certified by accreditations and assessments has required educators, both at the college level and in the schools, to spend more time teaching to achieve academic goals and less time cultivating students’ holistic growth and creativity.

Even so, while Lesley developed into a strong academic university with a broad array of scholarly and professional courses, experiential learning has remained at the heart of its pedagogy. At Lesley, faculty members typically allow time for flowing spontaneity in their courses, and professor-facilitated activities provide opportunities for student-driven learning. We concluded that excellent teachers let go of habits and take risks, opening their classrooms to possibilities for creative group experiences that transcend the mere presentation of academic material.

Generations of graduates have emerged from Lesley well versed in their academic fields, as well as aware of the educational importance of play and experiential learning. Those graduates, including Lois Zimmerman, have glided out like fireflies, enlightening each successive generation with their neo-Froebelian luminescence.

Lesley College in the 1940s

During the early 20th century, Lesley followed many other teacher preparation schools by adding first a three-year and then a four-year program option to its foundational two-year program. The School’s 1940-41 catalogue noted a trend in teacher education toward “full academic training” and claimed that the proposed Lesley four-year program was “designed to meet the requirements of states where a four year Teacher-training course is required, but not necessarily a degree.” The four-year Bachelor of Science in Education degree was finally authorized by the state in time for awarding of the first degrees in 1945.

¹ After Edith Lesley’s death, Merl Ruskin Wolfard, her husband, provided extensive reminiscences about her tenure at Lesley in a long letter. Much of our understanding of her thoughts comes from that second-hand document and letters written by Edith Lesley as well as from perusal of the college catalogues, meeting minutes, and articles in the school newspaper (*The Lantern*) and yearbook (*The Lesleyan*), all of which can be found in the Lesley Archives.

In 1945, *The Lesleyan* reported that Lois Zimmerman was named the “most sophisticated” member of her graduating class. By the time she reconnected with Lesley in 2009, after sixty-four years filled with parenting, teaching, and professional clowning, Lois was well past sophistication. The words of folksinger Bob Dylan (1964) come to mind: “Ah, but I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now.”

Bright, energetic, and in her eighties, Lois beamed herself from her home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, onto our computer screen via the voice-over-Internet protocol service, Skype. We were eager to learn from one of Lesley’s very first four-year degree recipients. She was more than happy to comply. “I don’t know how I ended up at Lesley,” she said with a grin, “but I’m glad I did.”

Lois told us that she had always wanted to be a teacher, and when her parents sent her to a liberal arts college in Connecticut, she intentionally failed a course in order to be allowed to transfer to a teacher’s college. She remembers that her parents were initially interested in a school founded by Miss Wheelock, but they eventually decided to send her to Lesley in 1942, leaving her well placed to take advantage of the new four-year degree program.

At Lesley, Lois’ favorite teacher was the popular Professor Mark Crockett. A retrospective, published in the May 31, 1961 newspaper, *The Lantern*, reported that, during his 23-year tenure, Crockett was legendary for his lively lectures, charismatic personality, and penetrating blue eyes. Lois remembered that Crockett, a social studies professor, made history come alive and brought politics into the classroom. She recalled that in 1944 she brought her first absentee ballot with her to her Government and United States History class, and Crockett focused the discussion on voting and the candidates on her ballot. Lois proudly stood at the grand piano that sat in the front of the classroom, and she marked her ballot right there. She felt doubly special, as the star of her beloved professor’s “show” and as a valued voting citizen of her country. Lois has cherished that moment (and voted) ever since. This demonstrates the sense of empowerment and growth that she developed thanks to the expertise of an excellent Lesley professor.

Lois was on the 1945 yearbook staff, and that year’s *The Lesleyan* was dedicated to Dr. Crockett. The inscription reads, “His greatness lies in the manner in which he meets life.” Crockett was a key player in the transformation from Lesley School to Lesley College. On December 13, 1941, minutes report that he was elected both first president of the Board of Trustees and first chairman of the newly formed Corporation of the College (the two bodies had mostly overlapping membership at their inceptions). As board president he was ex officio member of all its committees, and he undoubtedly played a major role in Lesley’s transition to a degree-granting academic college. According to the May 31, 1961, edition of the Lesley school newspaper, *The Lantern*, Dr. Crockett chaired the original Curriculum Committee and was involved in the development of the new college curriculum. On January 18, 1943, the minutes indicate that Crockett was unanimously re-elected to the Board of Trustees, as president, and to a four-person executive committee that included founder Edith Lesley Wolfard and school principal Gertrude Malloch. As the year progressed, however, conflict plagued Lesley’s governing bodies, but the details are not clear. Crockett’s last appearance in Corporation minutes was on June 22, 1943. When the Corporation elected a new Board of Trustees on July 7 of that year Crockett’s name was not on the list.

Dr. Walter Dearborn, elected to replace Crockett as president, received a letter from Edith Lesley Wolfard, dated October 16, 1943, that evoked a sense of the tensions of the times at Lesley: “I have of course been very troubled of late years about the future status of the school and particularly its change to a college.” However, the exact nature of her concerns remains unknown. We might speculate that, while she and others realized that the survival and relevance of Lesley lay in its becoming a full college, there may have lingered unease about how this change would affect the ideals of the kindergarten-focused mission that had informed the school from its founding.

Changing Goals, Enduring Values

What exactly was Lesley’s first mission? The Lesley Normal School originally focused on kindergarten training, and the teachings of Friedrich Froebel dominated the curriculum, including Froebel’s emphasis on play. Once trained in this pedagogy, a teacher could use Froebel’s methods to guide children through playful processes of active discovery, to channel their play into organic experiences of self-expression, empowerment and growth (Baader, 2004). To this day Lesley’s enduring emphasis on student-centered, experiential learning has its philosophical roots deeply grounded in Froebel’s ideas.

By the time Lois Zimmerman arrived in 1942, Lesley’s course catalogue for that year included a plethora of offerings in English, social studies, psychology, and music, as well as a variety of approaches to education. But the Froebelian tradition still lay at the heart of Lesley’s pedagogy. Lois and her classmates learned about the educational importance of play and physical activity (kinesthetic learning) and had plenty of opportunity to try out the new songs and games, so Lois remembers that they also learned—with the children as their teachers.

After graduating, Lois had four children of her own and didn’t start her career as a kindergarten teacher until 1966. Still, she never forgot what she learned at Lesley and, she told us, “I put it to good use when I had the chance.” In her years as a kindergarten teacher, Lois was partial to the non-competitive circle games that give each child a turn to shine most brightly. In one of her favorites, one child (eg. Shana) would begin in the center of the circle. The game would begin with the circle singing, “What can you do, Shana, Shana? What can you do, Shana, today?” Shana would wave her hands, jump up and down, or otherwise “strut her stuff.” Her classmates would sing, “We can do it too!” They would join her in movement and then sing, “Who do you choose?” Shana would choose the next star, and around they would go.

Of course, Lois played too, and remembered “during my turn I would choose the less popular children who might otherwise be ignored by their classmates.” Every child ended up feeling included and special, and they all learned to take turns leading and following. In the process, they developed motor skills and blew off some steam. And it was fun for all, especially Lois Zimmerman.

About her teaching career, Lois says, “I used to think I shouldn’t really be paid for doing something I enjoyed so much.” But she is also keenly aware of her impact on her students. “Kindergarten was their first experience in education,” she says. “It could color their feelings about school for the rest of their lives.” And apparently her students felt way that as well. She was deeply honored when a group of graduating high school

students, years later, remembered their kindergarten teacher, Lois Zimmerman, and presented her with a teaching excellence award.

After sixteen years of kindergarten, Lois began teaching “readiness first grade,” a class for kindergarten graduates deemed not yet mature enough to succeed in first grade. She was aware that the fact that these children had been held back from first grade presented the danger that they would be demoralized by feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. To teach reading, she used a program developed by Pleasant Rowland for Addison-Wesley she called “Super Kids.” This provided Lois with an effective way to bolster and maintain the children’s collective self-esteem. “We just became the Super Kids,” recalls Lois. “The kids in the story in the program formed a Super-Kids Club, so our classroom became our own Super-Kids Club. We were a very special group of people. I was a Super Kid too, of course.”

After a few years, Lois’ Super-Kids Club received new recruits when Indianapolis’ court-ordered desegregation program bused underprivileged inner-city African American children to her school in Wayne Township, Indiana. Lois remembers vividly one of those new students, a little girl named Patty. Lois loved to watch the children come in the door in the morning “with big smiles on their faces, just saying, well, ‘what exciting is going to happen today?’” Sometimes Patty came in like that—excited and ready for action. Sometimes she just waited outside the door to be invited in. Sometimes she would mix right in with the other children. Sometimes she would come in, sit down, and cry. Lois always found ways to bridge her involvement in the class and even today thinks lovingly of Patty.

Before desegregation, Lois’ readiness first grade class consisted of children who had benefited from an excellent kindergarten but still had needed a year to mature enough to do well in first grade. With desegregation, she found that the buses brought children who were mature but were inadequately prepared for first grade. The two groups needed entirely different types of teaching, and her frustrated attempts to serve both at the same time ended up serving neither. “I still feel bad about it,” she says, “that I couldn’t help either group adequately.” After her requests to have the class split up were turned down, she decided that she was not willing to teach under such conditions.

Learning from Kindergartens

Lois took early retirement in 1985, but did not leave the field of teaching. She spent sixteen years, two days a week, helping her daughter teach readiness first grade for language delayed children, and she still tutors kindergarteners. She is the epitome of a Lesley educated lifelong learner.

“Edith Lesley Wolfard,” she says, “would be very unhappy to see kindergartens today, because they’re so structured, so academic. There’s very little play and very little spontaneity.” Lois blames this trend on the influence of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, which she feels squeezes out spontaneity and play, depriving kindergarteners of crucial opportunities to use and develop their imaginations. A number of educators believe the standardized exams now pervasive throughout the country have squeezed out play in curricula; the emphasis on academics has even led to the elimination of recess in some states (Jeynes, 2006). “By emphasizing standardized testing and rigorous

academics, pre-first grade in the United States acts merely as an extension of subsequent elementary years, which Froebel never intended” (p. 1953).

The problem is an old one; standardized tests of educational success are used to hold educators accountable and to make sure that education dollars are spent in ways that yield measurable results. The tests measure academic attainment, but they do not tap the sorts of things that children develop particularly well in classic kindergarten environments, such as imagination, creativity, efficacy, enthusiasm, and self-discipline. Schools and their teachers today are saddled with the practical task of preparing students for tests first, life second. This motivates early childhood educators to spend less time on stories, songs, and play, and more time on reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Froebel believed that the three Rs do not belong in kindergarten; rather time is better spent on the whole child’s “spiritual and character development,” through guided play activities with a “well-trained and motherly teacher” (Dombkowski, 2001, p. 528). Once students are developmentally ready to learn to read, they will do so in elementary school. “We notice,” wrote Froebel, “that if children are not given the care which takes their stage of human development into consideration, they will lack the foundation for the task ahead in school and for their later lives in general” (<http://www.friedrichfroebel.com>).

In Lesley’s early days, kindergartens were on the fringes of American education—only about one in ten U.S. schools had kindergartens in 1920. As the country progressed toward almost universal kindergarten by the 1980s, the non-academic, play-centered methods of Froebelian kindergartens were subjected to increased scrutiny (Dombrowski, 2001). Why waste time and money on kids playing around, when kindergarteners could get an early start on the academic learning they would continue in elementary school? “Time and again,” writes Kristin Dombkowski, “the non-academic emphasis of the kindergarten has come under attack. Time and again, the kindergarten has struggled to define itself in relationship to the public primary school” (p. 528).

Pressure to “beef up” kindergarten has been particularly strong when it has seemed that the United States was losing its economic or technological dominance in the world. Yet, as Mitchel Resnick, director of the Lifelong Kindergarten group at the MIT Media Lab, suggests, creative thinking skills are key to success in a competitive world. He argues that kindergartens in the Froebelian tradition develop creative thinking by empowering children to imagine, create, play, share, reflect, and imagine some more. When academically-oriented worksheets and flashcards invade kindergartens, students are deprived of crucial creativity-building experiences. “Instead of making kindergarten like the rest of school,” he writes, “we need to make the rest of school (indeed, the rest of life) more like kindergarten” (Resnick, 2007, p.1).

This tension between experiential and academic pedagogy exists at all educational levels—even in universities. While some room may still be preserved in early childhood education for playful, spontaneous learning experiences guided by nurturing teachers in homey classrooms, as children progress up the grades they are met with increasingly structured academic lessons delivered by authoritative teachers/professors in sterile, regimented settings. The transition from kindergarten through the school grades eases future workers out of their childhood homes and into the workplace. Almost invariably, highly structured, academic education is the norm by high school, and few universities leave much room for experiential learning and educational play.

At Lesley this tension has played out in a unique way. Historically, Lesley has survived by expanding its offerings and adjusting its pedagogy to fit changing social, political, legal, technical, and economic realities. In the process, Lesley has moved strongly, if incrementally, in the academic direction. The degree requirements and standardized tests that aspiring teachers must pass to be certified to teach have impacted teacher training at Lesley.

But not everybody has welcomed these developments, and there has been strong counter-pressure. The road has not always been easy. Even Edith Lesley Wolfard apparently had very mixed feelings as she helped the institution she founded as a Froebelian school for kindergarten teachers to transform itself into a liberal arts college. In the reminiscence Merl Ruskin Wolfard wrote after her death, he spoke of her divided sentiments:

Mrs. Wolfard was a disciple of Froebel and endeavored to teach through “doing” as far as is practicable. . . . Mrs. Wolfard’s spirit was a little saddened when . . . the trend in education drifted toward the requirement of a more academic training for kindergarten and elementary teachers. Nonetheless, Mrs. Wolfard did cooperate diligently with educational accrediting committees and with the requirements of the educational authorities in the State of Massachusetts which led up to the establishment of Lesley College and its wide accreditation as a College devoted to educational activities. (Wolfard, n.d.)

Excellence in Teaching

Given the Froebelian influences, in its first hundred years Lesley University has distinguished itself as an academic institution with a strong emphasis on experiential learning and that emphasis has been revisited and reviewed in recent years. Currently, experiential courses, internships, or student teaching are required of both undergraduate and many graduate students. Class sizes are kept small to encourage active student participation in classroom activities. Student-driven discussions and group exercises, rather than formal lectures, are the instructional norm. Lesley’s conscious effort to combine academic and experiential learning is part of what makes it a very special place. Continuing with this legacy and the centrality of “experience” at Lesley University today, we now turn to the discussions with contemporary professors that took place as part of the GSASS grant that started this inquiry.

In the spring of 2008, six professors—Julia Byers (chair), Matthew Hirshberg, Alexandra Johnson, Amy Morrison, Donna Newman Bluestein, and Prilly Sanville—began meeting to discuss the nature of excellent teaching and to identify the attributes and methods of Lesley’s most excellent teachers. They examined the kind of teaching that developed and continues to develop students such as Lois Zimmerman. The six participants represented a variety of fields, including social science, human services, creative writing, expressive therapies, and creative arts and learning. Our numbers included undergraduate and graduate teachers, core and adjunct faculty, old hands and relative newcomers to Lesley. Our diversity yielded rich discussions through which we identified common issues and principles of teaching excellence that transcend the

boundaries of disciplines. What follows flows from those original brainstorming sessions, the interviews with Lois Zimmerman, and from our continued reflection on these topics during the preparation of this narrative.

Lesley University's website provides a clearly articulated mission.

Lesley University is committed to active learning, scholarly research, critical inquiry, and diverse forms of artistic practice through close mentoring relationships among students, faculty, and practitioners in the field. Lesley prepares graduates with the knowledge, skill, understanding, and ethical judgment to be catalysts who shape a more just, humane, and sustainable world. (<http://www.lesley.edu/about/mission-and-values.html>).

Guided by this vision, our view is that excellence in teaching is displayed to the extent that teachers empower their students to make life better for themselves and others. Many themes emerged from the rich discussions we had on the topic of excellence in teaching.

We concluded that part of the Lesley professor's job is indeed to facilitate the attainment of academic skills and knowledge. Lesley graduates, who gain professional skills, specialized knowledge, and the ability to demonstrate academic achievement, are empowered to make a difference. But to make a significant, positive difference, graduates must also possess inquiring minds, creativity, wisdom, compassion, ethics, enthusiasm, and practical experience. Excellent Lesley professors manage to foster all these attributes in their students. Excellent professors approach their teaching holistically, with the higher goal of preparing their students for the multiple demands of a life of service. But they never forget that teaching advanced skills and knowledge is also a fundamental part of their job.

Empowerment and Growth through Creative Conflict

In our discussions we discovered that, for all of us, "teaching well" has required negotiating the tension between careful pedagogical planning of academically grounded lessons and flexible openness to the organic flow of an engaged classroom. We agreed that, although it is tempting to play it safe and strictly structure our teaching, it is crucial to risk allowing room for those unpredictable moments when the deepest learning can take place. In taking that risk, however, it is important not to use precious class time to indulge in unfocused diversions of tangential value. We provided examples of working with resistant students.

Donna Newman Bluestein emphasized the importance of not letting students derail the classroom learning and described her way of dealing with it. Creatively she names the disagreement with a topic or circumstance and then moves forward with the curriculum goals of the day. Newman remembered a time when a student, being misinformed about the curriculum task, was acting out and purposely not agreeing with the direction of the class. The student's response was clearly triggered by something in her own former experience. Newman chose to explore the issue with her student after class reflecting on the meaning of the resistance not only for her student but her own response so that both parties could learn from the experience. She was very tempted to

use the lesson in the class but realized that the content was too subjective and purposely chose not to take time in the class on this occasion.

An excellent teacher is able to carefully plan classroom processes that allow relevant learning to unfold from the spontaneous interactions. Another effective method is to elicit conflict or cognitive dissonance by challenging strongly held beliefs, presenting perplexing dilemmas, or initiating discussion on controversial issues. As students work through conflicting perspectives in the classroom and in their individual minds, and then reflect on them, they can be guided to process material deeply and exercise their reasoning muscles towards empowerment and growth.

There was a time when Prilly Sanville was teaching in a Lesley off-campus program in a graduate course on Drama and Critical Literacy. In the context of the class, which involved discussing issues of class and race, two students became very angry with each other. She described what happened next.

It was a moment of cognitive dissonance for all in the class. This occurred right before lunch, so I let the students go to lunch. I sat and thought, “What do I do now? This has to be addressed but how?” And then I knew I had to trust who I was and not what I knew. When the students came back I acknowledged the incident and then asked, “Are we agreed we are all professionals here, and we are here to make the world better for the children we teach?” Then I proceeded to do an experiential learning through drama teaching using Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed tools. The students chose a common social situation which they all could relate to. Then I facilitated their work in groups, role playing from different human perspectives within the chosen situation. It was an eye-opening moment. The class atmosphere changed and the playing field was leveled. The group came together and crossed racial and class divides not only in the drama work but also in their reflective discussion. I had taken a risk in bringing the conflict into the class curriculum, but in the process gained a sense of awe in trusting the students’ outcome. I witnessed educators coming forward to support each other in a way that I was not sure was possible in this particular class.

The teacher’s role is to allow that learning process to develop organically while keeping it on track. Like developing a good golf swing, doing this well requires sharp focus and a light but strong and precise touch. It is only after years of preparation and practice that the teaching professional can walk into a classroom with the confidence and experience necessary to lead and follow the flow of collective learning.

Thus, expecting the unexpected is another one of the true skills an excellent teacher must have as his/her practice. Prilly Sanville told of another formative experience in her teaching career.

A moment in teaching that goes back many years that has deeply informed my teaching is a time I was teaching middle school students in an after- school program designed to keep youth off the streets. This was an urban setting in New England. This experience informed my teaching at an early stage of my career and has been part of my foundation in working with teachers at Lesley. I was teaching a drama class with a mixed group of Latino and Hispanic, African American, and

European American students mostly from working class families. We were very engaged in drama. One afternoon, two unannounced high school students walked into the classroom. The tallest, and clearly the leader, pulled out a knife. Immediately all the students hid behind me. It was a frozen moment. In one split second, I humored myself thinking that the children thought I was their shield and that I could protect them as the young man towered over me pointing the knife. I looked this young man dead straight in the eye. I saw that he wanted to say something. His face did not appear threatening, but he actually looked afraid. I asked him to please put down the knife as he was scaring all of us. He seemed to forget he had the threatening knife in his hand but now knew he had our attention. He said he needed to talk with me. I said I couldn't talk to him if he had a knife. Again he looked perplexed that he actually had a knife but proceeded to close it and give it to me. Subsequently, he said, "It isn't fair that the middle school kids have drama and the high school kids don't have a drama class." He was here because he wanted a drama class! I suddenly realized that this young man only knew power through the threat of a weapon, not by using words or organizing. I knew this was a crucial moment in learning. It was not okay that he had pulled a knife, but there was also an opportunity to learn in the classroom about the role of advocacy. I could teach him and his friends to do things differently at least in this setting. I told him I agreed with his comment and later, after the class was dismissed, I would assist him in organizing a group to present a proposal to the director for drama for the high school students. (I also let him know he needed to face consequences for the using the knife most inappropriately in the building and scaring us. The director of the program was responsible to follow up with remediation since as I did not press official charges.) A long story made short, the high school youth did finally receive a drama program. But this was only after the director and I negotiated and used a process that taught the youth another way of relating to the school rules, policies, and behaviors. This experience of on-the-job training early in my career taught me how to look at *power* and about the importance of understanding the underlying dynamics of *power* in assisting teachers and students. To this day, teaching about power is a cornerstone of my teaching. This frightened young man was my teacher that day.

At Lesley, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, tensions between experiential and academic learning have surfaced in a discourse about the issue of rigor. Some ambitious students have felt that various courses have not been intellectually challenging enough and have not contributed sufficiently to their academic advancement. At the same time, some faculty members have been concerned with the general academic achievement levels of their students. This has led us into creative conflict as we discuss how standards of academic rigor can be raised and maintained. As Lesley University moves into its second century, we find ourselves grappling in particular with the issue of how to best use the new technologies to enhance our pedagogical practices while maintaining Lesley's enduring Froebelian emphasis on active learning through experience. This topic is increasingly important as we experiment with various formats for distributed learning. Siemens and Matheos (2010) contend that there are benefits we have yet to realize.

Emerging technologies offer faculty additional opportunities to increase engagement with colleagues and learners (Siemens and Tittengerger, 2009). A spectrum of online, blended, and physically-based learning centres [sic], each advocating a participatory approach to pedagogy, can serve the needs of all learners (from highly motivated and self-directed to those who prefer greater structure and guidance). (A model of future universities, para. 8)

Just as Professor Mark Crockett encouraged Lois Zimmerman so many years ago, we must continue to prepare our students, and allow ourselves, to be open to new learning. Sixty years after graduating from Lesley, Lois Zimmerman, in true Lesley tradition and still eager to learn, taught herself a new technology (using Skype) in order to dialogue “in person” with us.

Active Discovery

One goal of excellent teachers is to facilitate inspired, creative, academic learning through lessons that both challenge the intellect and encourage student involvement and playful flow. As our colleague Alex Johnson pointed out in one of our discussions, a great example of this sort of excellence was demonstrated repeatedly by her mentor, MIT physics professor, Walter Lewin.

Professor Lewin understood the equation between learning and play. He once used his 6-foot-2 frame as a pendulum, swinging across the stage to show how pendulums are independent of mass. He (mockingly) beat a student with cat fur to explain electrostatics. He fired a canon with a golf ball at a monkey in a bullet-proof vest to demonstrate the trajectories of objects in free fall. “Physics works!” he shouted after such spirited in-class demonstrations. It might be said the physics of his creative teaching is what works.

Like her mentor, in her creative writing class, Alex is always looking for ways to give her students new prompts to inspire their learning. Professor Lewin taught her that the value of experiential learning can occur across any discipline. The value of students feeling engaged and alive is crucial to the retention of knowledge.

Excellence in teaching also requires sensitivity to the different capabilities, backgrounds, personalities, and needs of individual students and to the socio-emotional context in which their collective learning takes place. Such sensitivity allows teachers to both foster healthy classroom communities and also to effectively tailor their teaching to each of their students. Without it, students may feel alienated, invalidated, or unmotivated in one-size-fits-all classrooms that do not serve their needs. The way Lois Zimmerman tailored learning to different needs, such as with her student Patty, provides a good example of this.

Lois’s sensitivity was a cornerstone of her pedagogy. She gave each student in her class the opportunity to be honored as “child of the week.” For one week, each child was given the chance to shine a bit more brightly, to be the center of attention, and to lead.

Lois got to know each of her students better this way, they learned more about each other, and inclusive classroom bonds were reinforced. This helped her remain sensitive to the needs of each student, while fostering a healthy socio-emotional environment in the classroom.

At the graduate level, Julia Byers frequently uses warm-up activities to engage higher education students in facilitating community awareness of deeply embedded assumptions and biases that often occur in the learning setting.

One day, I brought in approximately 20 large fieldstones and hid inspiring quotations under different rocks for students to spontaneously choose. After students had the opportunity to share how they related to the quotations, such as “common sense is the knack of seeing things as they are and doing things as they ought to be done” (C.E. Stowe), or “courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all others” (Winston Churchill), or “actions speak louder than words” (proverb), I asked for volunteers to engage in a fish bowl experience. The students selected if they wanted to take on a female role or male role, thus to investigate assumptions behind stereotypical roles, or be an observer of the process. The directive of the activity was to construct a tower of balancing rocks to make the highest structure possible. The metaphor was used to explore the dynamics of negotiation and meaning in achieving tasks such as graduate school assignments. The enjoyment of watching the trial and error of balancing rocks produced a humorous and yet serious atmosphere. After 15 minutes of exploring the tension of power dynamics, mediating roles, and other characteristics in the solving of the task, one group figured out that they could hold or put the rocks on chairs or tables to elevate the height of their sculpture. We witnessed and were amazed by the classmates’ initial choice to stick with what they traditionally knew or what they thought was expected of them. Then they realized that new ideas were honored and in fact encouraged. Rather than compete, the two groups decided to work as a whole team to complete the task. One student commented that they didn’t need to read the book *Communities of Practice* by Etienne Wenger (1998) since they had witnessed all the issues of negotiation, reification, and change within the observational activity. We then proceeded to deconstruct the process of how the group had worked together and finally achieved the outcome that they felt was the best response to the task. Both teachers and therapists in the interdisciplinary class came away from the experience remembering the symbolic meaning of the rocks and far beyond. This warm-up activity created an example of active discovery rather than using textbooks to define operational definitions, emphasizing constructivist knowledge.

Student-Centered Approach: The Magician and the Firefly

In her Lesley days, storytelling was Lois Zimmerman’s favorite class. Since taking that course, she has nurtured the imaginations of thousands of children as a storyteller, perfecting her skills both inside and outside the classroom. Her advice: Sit down at the children’s level, make plenty of eye contact, speak with enthusiasm, and, for

the little ones, use plenty of repetition. Lois says that a good Winnie the Pooh story really gets kids' imaginations flowing and, for her, that is one of the most important things a teacher can do.

Lois also enjoys painting her face and transforming herself into a magical clown named Firefly. Firefly and her long-time sidekick, a clown doll named Friendly Freddy, have been entertaining and enlightening children together for many years. She begins her magic shows with a lesson on fireflies and with a discussion on the difference between "real" and "pretend." Then Firefly tells them a story. Later, Firefly flashes her light and asks the children, "Would you like to see my magic tricks now?"

Just because children "grow up" doesn't mean that they must lose their playfulness. Adult demands and stresses often burden both students and faculty in their quest for learning. It is hard to maintain a sense of freshness, innovation, and original critical thinking when society surrounds today's students with overwhelming convergent rather than divergent ways of processing information. While Lesley honors the balance of academic rigor with creative opportunities, the emphasis is on helping the students to find their own balance between a sense of individual and collective needs in education. Lois, as a pioneer in early education, still serves to remind us of the inherent simple attributes of relating to others in meaningful ways to bring out the best qualities of another person.

"Teaching well" at Lesley University, according to the six professors involved in this research, requires balancing meticulous preparation with a willingness to indulge in student-driven feasts of learning. We discovered that, for all of us, teaching well requires negotiating the tension between careful pedagogical planning and flexible openness to the organic flow of an engaged classroom. We agreed that, although it is tempting to play it safe and strictly structure our classes, it is crucial to risk allowing room for the unpredictable. Practicing a balanced art of teaching has been one of Lesley's most precious traditions. Whether through acting in the moment in response to adverse circumstances or building innovative surprise learning environments within the physics of teaching or engaging students in direct individual and collective awareness for social competence, collaboratively we celebrate all the firefly educators who strive to reach excellence in teaching through building a sense of profound aliveness in learning. To our own legendary torchbearer, Edith Lesley Wolfard, we are grateful for her enterprise, vision, and, ultimately, openness to change. And we thank Lois, one of thousands of Lesley educated educators, a magical firefly who has enlightened, entertained, and enriched the lives of countless children through excellence in teaching.

We would like to dedicate this chapter to Janet Kendrick, 1942-2008, a life-long learner, community leader, and student whose last hours were spent in joyful learning in the classroom at Lesley University.

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