

Constance Dilley: Traveling with the Wise Ones

Universities, confronted with rising costs, diminishing contributions, and the need to cut back hiring, are in trouble. They have hired professional fund raisers and management consultants to find a way forward, and one result of this is to think of their students as clients. Graduate programs feel an obligation to guarantee a return on the investment students are making through their tuition fees, and this return is too often thought of as preparing the student for a job. The job being promoted, at least in Ph.D. programs, is a career in academia.

Through their work as teaching and research assistants, grad students are initiated into the hegemony which holds that a career at the university is the highest calling. In fact, many professors have moved directly from their graduate studies to a teaching post without any experience of what I think of as “the street”: that bustling place where innovation and enterprise promote workers to positions of responsibility, and where independence is sometimes a virtue.

Another result of the financial straits in which universities find themselves is to welcome older students back to school. In many places, distinct programs have been fashioned for the mature person interested in life-long learning. In other places, people can, for a fee, audit actual university courses. But given the demographics of the day, some seniors have opted to sign up for degree-granting courses. This is not done in order to get a job: their careers are well behind them. It’s done for the love of learning. I was one of those students and, for the record, received my Ph.D. several months after my 68th birthday.

By the end of my studies, I had become convinced that my university was sitting on a treasure trove of experience and knowledge which it failed both to recognize and to exploit: the mature student. Had it been able to harness the energies and abilities of these students and to put them in the service of the young, it might have alleviated some of the anxieties about jobs, and it certainly would have presented other students with broader, more informed work options. As it was, a gap yawned between the understanding of some professors and that of the mature student. The former had book learning, the latter, worldly experience. But no effort was made by the academy to bridge this distance. At times, I felt as if mature students were threatening the hegemony of the university and its presumption of superiority. What follows is a description of my own experiences and the developments which led me to that opinion.

The beginnings

Prudently, I began by taking one course as a special student in the department of Communication and Culture at the Master’s level, just to see if I still liked going to school. Although I already had an M.S. in social work, it was 40 years old and I was unsure.

I learned quickly enough that I was out of sync with most of the students. In one class discussion about the impact of film, I was relating a comment made to me in the ’60s by John Grierson, the famed founder of the National Film Board of Canada. A young blond boy cut me off, asking “Couldn’t we talk about something contemporary that we can all relate to?” Obviously, my “contemporary” was not his, and over the years I became increasingly perplexed and appalled by the many

things the other students had little knowledge of and no interest in. How does one grow in knowledge and understanding with such scant knowledge of the past?

But aside from rhetorical questions, behavior was also confounding. When I gave my first presentation, I rose from my seat and delivered it from cue cards. A presentation, in my book, was still a performance and not the reading of a paper. I learned soon enough to stay in my seat. In each class over the years, a few students understood that I knew something from which they could learn. We went for coffees and organized independent reading courses. But for the most part, I was just the old lady at the back of the class.

My final paper in that trial class was a sweeping analysis of the confrontation of theory and technology, ranging from the early Chicago School through Edward Sapir and on to the advent of TV and the net. I loved writing it and thought it was good. It came back with the most scathing comment I had ever received, and a “B,” probably the lowest grade in the class. I was confused and upset. There was a written comment about how I had committed an “intentional fallacy,” which I took to mean that I had purposefully misled the reader, though a Google search soon clarified that definition. I asked to see the professor, just to understand what had happened. The other students thought he was a cool guy, but he had little time for me. Two months later, we finally had a meeting in a coffee shop of his choosing. He turned idly to a page at random and read a sentence in which I had written that Sapir, son of an orthodox Jewish cantor and an immigrant to the States, viewed American life from the margins. “How do you know that?” he demanded, meaning how did I know Sapir viewed society from the margins. I talked about demographics, Chicago at the turn of the last century, American anti-Semitism in the ’20s, etc. but he wanted to know my source. No source, I said. Just life! He ended the meeting, saying that I obviously wasn’t graduate school material and suggested that I should not pursue a degree. I think that was the moment I decided to apply to the program.

I had intended to apply to the Master’s Program but the old professor who interviewed me encouraged me to apply to the Ph.D. program. Didn’t I already have a Master’s degree? Hadn’t I been the editor-in-chief of *Cinema Canada*, a national film magazine, for 15 years? Hadn’t I written and thought about communication and culture for most of my adult life? The answer to all the above was “yes.” Unlike the cool professor, this one knew I had been somebody once. He retired the following year and I began my journey as a registered Ph.D. student.

Student life

Knowing I had to figure out what was wrong with the paper I had been so proud of, I turned to the university’s writing workshop, where you could get comments and advice about your writing. The very gentle soul who looked at my paper, Bernadette, said, “Oh my!” and proceeded to give the format an evaluation. “You’ve used 14-point type!” No, it was 12-point, but it was Ariel. That was unacceptable, it seems; only New Times Roman would do. “You have a double-space between paragraphs!” Yes. That’s proper business formatting and makes the text easier to read. That, too, was unacceptable. And each paragraph had to be indented, not started at the margin. Obviously, to write acceptably at the university was to conform

stylistically, but that was fine. She wanted me to come back in a week, after she had had time to read the paper. The following week, she looked genuinely alarmed. “What’s wrong?” I asked. “Everything’s wrong!” she said. It turned out that I had had opinions and that I had argued them in the paper. In my defense, I could only explain that after 15 years of writing editorials, I was used to having opinions. I had got paid for having opinions. Opinions were out, it seemed, in grad school writing. She suggested—no, she insisted—that I had to camouflage my opinions by finding scholars who agreed with me, and then to cite them. “Think of them as your cheerleaders,” she said. What sort of a whacky world is this, I wondered, when after 40 years of experience on the street, I’m not welcome to bring my opinions to bear on the subject at hand? Whatever! This was going to be an interesting trip.

I was very careful to go by the book in the term paper for my first official course. Before turning it in, I returned to the writing workshop to read it aloud: Bernadette said it was perfect. When it came back with an A-, I asked the professor what its weakness had been. “I couldn’t hear your voice,” he said. So, although I had over-compensated, I knew I could get this right.

The following years kept my interest. One of the most remarkable things—and the reason that we do scholarship in the first place—was that, little by little, my strongly held opinions faded in the light of research and writing. Things I thought I knew to be true couldn’t be verified. Other things that I didn’t expect came up to invalidate still other opinions. I became more cautious, more inquisitive. I still refused, however, to believe in the validity of the intentional fallacy, and was happy to see that the hammer-lock of postmodern ideology on the academy seemed to be loosening during my time there.

Some things bothered me throughout these years. Other mature students over 50 were like me and had a wealth of experience. In one course, we formed an informal *kaffeeklatsch* and called ourselves The Wise Ones, just to offset the indifference we felt coming from both the students and the professor. One of us was a television actor who, at the time, had an important role in an ongoing sitcom; another broadcast a humorous radio commentary on current affairs every morning to stations across the country; a third was editor of a neighborhood paper, and still another was a star reporter from the largest daily in town. But all this experience and understanding of the world went for nothing. The university didn’t (couldn’t? wouldn’t?) tap into this accumulated cultural capital, either for the benefit of the pros or for the students. This capital, so painstakingly gathered, seemed worthless.

In this world where students had become clients and getting a job was mandatory, the university was mainstreaming the best students into academia despite the current hiring freeze. This seemed a great waste to me since the world outside the walls was so very interesting. Only once, during my last term (and because I had made such a pest of myself) did a professor ask me to address a class about alternative job opportunities. After I gave my presentation about “the street,” the need for innovation and enterprise, and the clear, fresh air that blows outside the confines of the academy, the professor looked like he had swallowed a pill, but students flocked to me, thanking me and asking for contact information. How might things have been different, had we all been asked to make such presentations in our first year? After all, we mature students knew the networks and had the contacts the

younger students needed. It was a terrible omission, in my opinion, not to realize that the mature cohort might serve as a bridge for the others. Instead, we seemed a threat to the academic world-view.

The culmination

The subject of my dissertation had been provoked by an absence I had noticed throughout the last years: our professors didn't give much importance to the role of individual agency when it came to change. From my working life, I was convinced that important change often happened through the initiative of individuals. In the words of Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I set out to explore this in the only field I thought I knew well: the development of film policy in the province of Quebec. The context was the tremendous social upheaval of the years 1960 to 1975 in Quebec and the parallel development of federal film policy in Ottawa.

Two comments reassured me as I set out. One member of my committee said, when I opined that I felt like a complete fraud, having arrived at the dissertation stage with such flimsy theoretical knowledge of the field, "Don't worry. We all feel like frauds." The second was a piece of advice. "The most important thing about your dissertation," said a professor from the business school, "is to finish it." I wondered at the time whether these comments would have been made to a younger student. Regardless, I was armed with a terrific, supportive committee and set out.

My work was basically archival and took me through nine different collections in three different cities. Time and again I thought that without my work experience in offices, where I maintained files, rolodexes, did research, and archived my own material, I would have been at a loss about how to organize the thousands of scraps of information I was accumulating.

Before I began to write, I organized all the bits of information chronologically. I really didn't know what it amounted to—there was too much detail for me to have an overview—but I knew I had covered the ground. It was interesting to see the dissertation evolve, almost like a living thing. When notes from the federal government, for instance, were paired with notes from the province, it became clear who had had lunch with whom. Private agendas confirmed meetings, and marginal notes added color to dreary policy documents. Following the cc's—the carbon copies—at the bottom of the letters revealed just who had been kept in the loop. It was fascinating and a story grew, not from my previous information but from what the record showed.

What my personal experience added, however, was not negligible. In many instances, I knew the people involved. I had interviewed many of them in a later period. Like Sapir, I was an immigrant, and as a French-speaking Anglophone in Quebec, I looked at the province from the margins. When I read an archived speech, I knew whether the speaker was tall or short, whether he had presence or was a bore, and whether certain things were delivered as humor or not. Once I began writing, the tone seemed right and I wondered what a young scholar would have made of much of the material. Getting the facts down is not the same as understanding the context. When I came across certain events of which I had had no previous knowledge, I knew I was onto something important. As a journalist

writing steadily on the subject for 15 years, my ignorance pointed to information that must have been carefully kept from the press. I'm not aware of a research term for the method I used. It was retroactive yet familiar observation or something. But whatever it was, only a mature student could have done it.

I had a swell time writing the dissertation. Being used to the regularity of a work day, I'd get up and write steadily for three hours every morning and then call it quits. After many months, the work was done. Simple!

I held my own at the defense and the committee seemed pleased. "You've written a thriller," was one comment. Members were startled by the language and style of the dissertation, but seemed happy to read it. Those closest to the subject matter said they had learned new things. The committee was generous and wrote in its evaluation that the dissertation should be published.

Lessons learned

Universities, with their tenured professors, try to meet opposing goals. They strive to foster curiosity, scholarship, and excellence. However, treating students as clients who require a return on their money has undermined the integrity of the older ethos. One need only look at the grading system where "A" is the new "C" and people like me graduate with all As. (As an undergraduate, I remember being thrilled when my grade moved from a C to a B-.) The university is in a quandary. Its original intent has little resonant meaning as it comes up against the pressure of the marketplace to perform.

In this context, the truly mature student—not the thirty-year-old who already feels ancient, but the truly old, like The Wise Ones, could enrich the university environment immeasurably if given a chance. The challenge to the universities is, now, to prepare students for jobs. While I take exception to this objective, it is nevertheless a reality. And who knows the jobs better than those of us who have spent our lives in the trenches? Rather than ignoring us as we sit calmly in the back rows, schools should bring us forward and pump us for information. They should engage in the lively debate about work, culture, and the creation of knowledge. They should admit that information is not knowledge, and that knowledge is not wisdom, and that all the technological advances in the world won't make a person wise. If you believe that wisdom is still the goal of a life well-lived, then there would be much to be gained by these exchanges. Shall we take the risk and begin?

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