

Meaning to Be an Educator



Pictured: Paul Kando, Coastal Senior College

“I was teaching in one of the universities while the country was suffering from a severe famine. People were dying of hunger, and I felt very helpless. As an economist, I had no tool in my tool box to fix that kind of situation”, relates Professor Muhammad Yunus, Nobel Laureate founder of Grameen Bank and over sixty *social business enterprises*, each designed to meet a specific unmet need – hunger, malnutrition, lack of decent shoes, lack of credit and so on. His greatest challenge, he says, was not finding the money. It “has been to change the mindset of people. Mindsets play strange tricks on us. We see things the way our minds have instructed our eyes to see”.

Indeed, in our stuff-and-money-oriented economy and society, which reduces us to "consumers" – i.e. to a function – it is easy to forget about our personhood; that what is important about us is not how much we earn or consume but that we are people. As an educator, I often ask myself if I am guilty of falling in line. Am I a mere *supplier* of knowledge? Are those who attend my classes mere *consumers* of it?

Preparing for every senior college class is an opportunity to wrestle with such questions and make the most of the answers. To educate means more than "to teach". It also

means "to rear", "to bring up", and "to foster "i.e." to help grow. If a senior college allows me to be an educator, then the least I can do is to help my students grow, not just in their knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the world but also as persons.

Before I propose a course I would like to offer, I ask myself (1)What are pressing unresolved problems society (and therefore my prospective students and their neighbors) face?, (2) How does what I have to offer address any of those problems? and (3) How can I encourage those taking my class to become active participants in solving those problems? I think these are relevant questions whether I teach a how-to class on reducing home heating costs or art history. The mere fact that groups of seniors come together in the same place for a shared purpose and interact with each other over a 6-8 week period, is a community building opportunity. The potential for new relationships forming is real. If new forms of action in response to community challenges and needs emerge from these contacts, those should be encouraged celebrated, and nurtured.

Swedish researchers regularly report on that country's culture of study circle learning. One factor they have been tracking is the relationship between study circles and citizenship. A key finding over many years has been that, regardless of subject matter, study circle participants tend to become more engaged citizens. This is an important finding, since a large majority of study circles are devoted to language studies, in preparation to vacationing in a foreign country.

I regard "seniors" as a great, often overlooked resource. There are way too many references in the media to Maine getting "too old" as if the "not young" were but a liability or dead weight on state and society. I don't buy that for a moment. We can all opt to be useless, or worse, at any age. Conversely, we can always opt to be more useful citizens than we have ever been – especially now that we have both life experience and time on our hands -- all the way until we become incapacitated or drop dead sometime in our ninth or tenth decade.

This realization should enrich the contribution each senior college brings to its community and, through the senior college network, the entire state. Beyond enriching the lives of seniors through the joy of lifelong learning, we, the faculty, also have an obligation to foster the "inner citizenship" of our students, not just for their benefit but for the benefit of the larger community.

submitted by – Paul Kando, Coastal