

Personal Statement  
Leslie S. Domonkos

For thirty years I have taught at Youngstown State University and I still get "turned on" by my students. Three decades of teaching have convinced me that there is no single magic formula that is applicable to all classes which would insure the creation of an effective learning environment. There are times, when for some inexplicable reason, a course does not generate a sense of excitement, no matter what the instructor tries. I have had my share of such classes through the years. Fortunately I can also state that there were occasions when that special spark was present which makes a class extraordinary, and the resulting interaction between students and teacher produced a memorable intellectual experience.

In the fall of 1993 I was assigned a special Honors Western Civilization class consisting almost exclusively of University Scholars, a group of students with ACT scores above 30, who receive full scholarships from the University. This is a new program at YSU and my students were the first Freshman class admitted into the program. I had never taught an honors class, my students were new to an university environment, yet something magical did happen, which made both the teaching as well as the learning experience special.

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The challenge confronting me was formidable: I faced a group of twenty-two young people who were undoubtedly very bright, but were not planning to become history majors. How does a teacher gain their attention, stimulate their interest, find the level of instruction best suited for a diverse and special group? From the first day it was made clear that this would be a demanding course, with structured lectures, extensive readings in original sources, class discussion and essay type of examinations. However, unlike so many boring history classes (which all of us remember) with long lists of rulers, dates and other unmemorable facts, the concentration in this class was on cultural matters, in the broadest sense of that word. We discussed the development and evolution of religions, literature, art, architecture, touched upon social and economic structures as well as the material life of a wide variety of people. The ethical systems of ancient Egypt, the legal developments of Mesopotamia, the monotheism of the Hebrews and the dualism of the Persians, were among the subjects we examined before turning to the more strictly "Western" cultures of the Greeks and Romans.

It was delightful to see the students develop their interpretive and analytical skills as they were challenged to look at historical problems in a critical fashion. It was soon evident that his class did have that certain spark, a feeling of excitement which extended beyond the narrow limits of the lecture hall. I found my students discussing historical issues in the corridors, elevators and the dining room. Jokingly they even gave historical names to each other. Before and after the regular class time several students would raise questions on materials not directly related to the subject we had discussed that day, but of interest to them.

Seeing the intense interest of the students, it was easy to open up to them on an intellectual as well as personal level. They were interested in my own research areas, wanted to know how I developed my lectures, how my own background as an immigrant shaped my career, and in what way my wide ranging travels help me personally to understand history. Not only did they get to know me, I got to know them as well. In the course of the quarter they bonded with each other and bonded with me in a way that was unique in my many years of teaching.

The special relationship which evolved between us is best illustrated by the following episode: Two months after the completion of the course, the University asked for nominations for the annual Distinguished Professor Awards. The majority of my Honors Western Civilization class wrote letters to the Provost nominating me for the honor, which I did receive in May 1994 at the Honors Day Convocation. It was one of the most satisfactory events in my long academic career.

Although I have consistently scored high on Student Evaluations in the past and had received the Distinguished Professor Award four times previously, (mainly for research), this was indeed a special occasion. It feels great to be recognized by one's peers, but the most rewarding experience is to be honored by our students.