WHINEY STUDENT TEACHERS

An Outside Perspective

By

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 1998

A THESIS IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

In

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Department of Educational Studies

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

February 2002

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The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date 6 March 02

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Abstract

Data suggests that student teachers at a major Canadian university, when in conflict with their faculty, tend to seek third party intervention in greater numbers than both their colleagues in other academic units at that university, and their counterparts in teacher education programs elsewhere. What does this mean? Is this particular teacher education program troubled, or are its student teachers simply more troublesome?

These intentionally provocative questions frame the inquiry undertaken here. The situation, captured at the focal point of conflict - the "complaint department," is presented within the context of a large and venerable institution being called to account for its activities by a relatively small and, for all intents and purposes, insignificant group of individuals. Whiney Student Teachers strives to present a fair and balanced analysis from the perspective of the "complaint handler." It is intended not to point fingers, criticize, blame, or otherwise suggest how teacher education "ought" to be conducted, but to enhance empathy among participants, and to promote positive opportunities for adult learning.
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PART ONE: THE SET-UP

On Conflict

"Conflict is an outgrowth of the diversity that characterizes our thoughts, our attitudes, our beliefs, our perceptions, and our social systems and structures."

(Weeks, 1992)

"It is neither bad, abnormal, nor dysfunctional."

(Moore, 1996)

"Conflicts are a part of campus life, and they have value, when understood."

(Warters, 1995)

"When we fear conflict or perceive it as a negative experience, we harm our chances of dealing with it effectively."

(Weeks, 1992)
Disputes are not bound to follow a negative course; conflict can lead to growth, and be productive for all parties. Whether this happens depends on participants' ability to devise efficient procedures for cooperative problem-solving, on their capacity to lay aside distrust and animosity while they work together on their conflict, and on the availability of solutions that will at least partially satisfy all the parties' interests. Unfortunately, many people in conflict are unable to develop an effective process, deal with the psychological barriers to settlement, or develop integrative solutions on their own. They often need help to do so (Moore, 1996, xiii).

Ombudspersons are appointed by governments and organizations to help those in conflict with authorities. The concept of an officially appointed "designated neutral" originated in early 19th century northern Europe, and has since gained broad acceptance throughout the West (Schaffer, 1999, p55; Gadlin, '2000). They are not advocates in the legal sense, and do not take sides in disputes.

The word "ombudsman," Swedish for "agent," is gender neutral (Robardet, 1998). The adoption of the term "ombudsperson" in recent decades has reflected the increased participation of women in the field. Many female practitioners, however, still prefer to self-identify as ombuds "men" (Tomkins, 1999). The abbreviation "ombud" (sing.) is presently gaining broad acceptance, especially in the United States where organizations such as The Ombuds Association (TOA) and the American Bar Association (ABA) are increasingly engaged in private sector mediation under the sobriquet "alternative dispute resolution," or ADR (Warters, 2000; ABA, 1999).
ADR devotees maintain that “the internal, low-level resolution of disputes is clearly preferred to more costly options such as litigation, internal upheaval, or bad publicity” (Warters, 1995, p3). The words “ombud,” “ombudsman,” and “ombudsperson” are used interchangeably in this thesis.

Larry Hill (1997), addressing the American Bar Association, distinguished between two types of ombudsperson. “Real” ombuds, in the “classic” mode, are instituted under government legislation and serve the general public in formal, quasi-judicial settings. “Wannabe” ombuds, however, are those appointed to monitor the internal affairs of organizations, such as corporations, labour unions, professional associations, and institutes of higher education.

According to Hill (in Wagner, 2000, p112), the role of a “real” ombudsperson is:

(a) to generate complaints against government administration;

(b) to use its extensive powers of investigation in performing a post-decision administrative audit; and

(c) to report publicly its findings and recommendations; but,

(d) not to change administrative decisions.

Organizational or “wannabe” ombudspersons are said to have a slightly different mission (in Wagner, 2000):

(a) to provide a confidential and neutral resource for receiving and offering options for resolving complaints within the organization;
(b) to use its [the Ombuds Office's] extensive access to all parts of the organization and its moral authority to provide information and - with permission - look into situations or intervene as a third party to resolve disputes;

(c) to gather anonymous aggregate data that indicate areas of organization improvement or problems; and

(d) to report these trends in periodic summaries with recommendations for change; but,

(e) not to change administrative decisions.

Public sector ombuds operations are highly structured bureaucracies which, in the course of their activities, typically “investigate,” “audit,” “criticize,” or “vindicate” (Wagner, 2000). Organizational ombudspersons, however, often themselves members of the groups being served, are usually “more informal” and “less judgemental” (p112).

For Hill (1997), organizational ombuds are merely mediators, troubleshooters, and fixers. However, due to the relative scarcity of top-level government positions, the vast majority of people who self-identify as ombudspersons through membership in associations affiliated with the practice belong to the latter group.

Ombuds offices on university campuses were initially established “in response to the social and political turmoil of the 1960s” (Gadlin, 2000). They can currently be found at virtually every major Canadian educational institution. The Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO, 2001) was formed in the early 1980s. Members meet biannually to
discuss issues of mutual concern, often in concert with their American counterpart, The University and College Ombuds Association (UCOA, 2000).

An internal poll illustrates the group’s diversity. Educational backgrounds include bachelor, masters, and doctoral degrees in medicine, political science, law, psychology, sociology, counselling, social work, adult education, and others. Employment and related experience prior to becoming an ombuds at university includes non-academic university staff, lawyer, police officer, union organizer, school trustee, university professor, MP’s assistant, zoo keeper, and professional musician.

Academic ombuds are uniquely situated to observe, record, and comment upon a broad variety of conducts and procedures related to education.

Any discussion of a systems approach to dispute resolution on campus must include reference to the campus ombudsperson. . . . Ombuds are often the most broadly experienced members of the campus community when it comes to conflict handling. Campus ombuds offices serve as a visible point of contact for people with a wide range of concerns. . . . They help by listening, explaining common interpretations of university regulations and customs, exploring possible avenues for problem resolution, offering options, and making referrals. As appropriate, ombuds may also work with all the parties in a conflict, serving informally as a conciliator and less frequently in the capacity of formal mediator. . . . The function is firmly grounded in the principles of objectivity, independence, confidentiality, and justice (Warters, 2000, p10).
Complaints from Student Teachers

The Ombuds Office at a major Canadian university reports having received an "excessive" number of complaints from education students over the past decade (AMS, 2001b). That is, data shows complaints from student teachers consistently comprising a substantial proportion of the office's annual caseload.

The report also notes the heightened intensity of student teachers' disaffection. It states that virtually all such complaints involve aspects of the practicum process. Conflict with sponsor teachers, faculty advisors, and faculty staff emerges as a primary theme. A general perception among complainants that evaluation and appeal processes are unfairly biased against them is similarly cited. The university's teacher education program is therein characterized as a "hot spot" of "perennial concern" (p12).

The vast majority of these complainants are seen to be older, "non-traditional" age university students seeking professional certification after being away from school for a number of years, either in the work force, or having and raising young families1. The report also notes that female student teacher complainants outnumber their male counterparts approximately 8:5 (p13).

Figure 1 below illustrates the incidence of complaints from student teachers compared to the

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1 AMS Ombuds Office intake instruments record neither complainants' ages nor details of personal circumstances (LCM).
"campus-wide average," a problematic figure which, for the purpose of this exercise, is derived by dividing the office’s annual caseload by the corresponding number of “identified respondent units.” Accordingly, as indicated below, the 1992-93 annual caseload of 120, when divided by the yearly total of 20 respondent units, is seen to yield a “campus-wide average” of 6.

The term “respondent unit” refers to the specific university department or faculty wherein a complainant’s grievance is seen to “reside.” For instance, if a student registered in the School of Human Kinetics were to register dissatisfaction with a Facility Management course offered in the Faculty of Commerce, the respondent unit would be Commerce, not HK. Similarly, if a Science undergraduate were to be having trouble with an Arts elective, the unit of record would be the department offering the course, not the student’s home faculty (AMS, 2001b, p5).

No tests for statistical significance have been performed, as the intention here is not to establish causality, or to prove any quantitative association. The introduction of the foregoing figures simply serves to illustrate the optics of the situation; that is, to graphically describe what it was that initially caught, and held, the investigator’s attention.
The number of complaints from the Faculty of Education is above seen to consistently exceed the "campus wide average." A footnote (x) temporally locates a 20 June 1996 advisory from the Ombuds Office alerting the Faculty of Education to an "excessively high number of complaints related to [your] faculty’s appeal processes for students who have failed their practicums" (AMS, 2001b, p12). Complaint levels remained "high" in subsequent years, however, and 2000-01 witnessed a dramatic surge.

Figure 2 below, culled from a more complete table found in the office’s 2000-01 annual report, compares complaints from student teachers to those generated by students in other identified
respondent units across the campus. Various dynamics are illuminated. For instance, while Political Science, Distance Education, and Social Work are shown to have registered low numbers consistently from year to year, other units, such as Law, Engineering, Human Kinetics, and Medicine, generated relatively high numbers in some years, but zero in others.

Medicine, Social Work, Nursing, Counselling Psychology, and other disciplines similarly employing practica or internships, appear relatively “hassle free.” And, the Faculty of Graduate Studies, a large, broadly inclusive, campus-wide designation encompassing thousands of students in a multitude of disciplines, is moderately represented overall with a longitudinal average of 3.4 complaints per year.

But, the Faculty of Education’s annual average of eleven eclipses all. And, only two other units come close in any single year, Law with ten in 1992-93, and Engineering with eleven in 1997-98. In both instances, however, complaints the following year were either greatly reduced or, as in the case of Law, eliminated altogether.

Somewhat skewed by the 2000-01 outlier.
The foregoing suggests that education students at this particular university seek third party intervention in numbers disproportionately greater than their cross-campus colleagues in other departments and programs. How does this compare with the experience of ombuds offices at other Canadian universities? That is, do students in teacher education programs elsewhere complain more, or less.

Data from other ACCUO member institutions with which to directly compare is unavailable, as convention dictates that program specific information not be published unless considered
necessary in addressing persistent systemic concerns - a circumstance heretofore unreported in Canada with respect to teacher education. Anecdotal testimony, however, appears to indicate that practicum related complaints from student teachers elsewhere in Canada occur with relatively less frequency.

For instance, the Ombudsperson at a prominent western Canadian ACCUO member institution stated that, while that office may receive “three or four” complaints from education students in a given year, it often receives “none” in others. And, unlike the program under consideration, where such complaints are invariably practicum or appeal related, a substantial proportion are said to involve “unsuccessful applicants to the program” (notes from unrecorded telephone conversation, 17 Oct. 2000).

A colleague at another prominent institution confirmed that, “We don’t get a disproportionately greater number of complaints from student teachers here” (e-mail, 19 October 2000). A venerable central Canadian university’s ombuds office similarly reports receiving “very few complaints from the Faculty of Education” (e-mail, 28 Aug. 2000). And, while the Ombuds Office at one of Canada’s largest and most highly regarded schools reported “less than ten” complaints from student teachers over the past three years (e-mail, 25 Feb. 2002) the Ombuds Office at the institution under consideration during the same period registered forty-six.

Moreover, when asked to characterize the incidence of complaints from student teachers at their
respective institutions, ombuds gathered at ACCUO's 2001 Mid-Winter National Conference responded with descriptions such as "negligible," and "inconsequential," with none reporting otherwise (personal notes from round-table discussion, Laurier University, 13 January 2001).

The foregoing suggests that student teachers in the program being studied, when in conflict with their faculty, tend to seek outside, third-party intervention in greater numbers than both their campus colleagues in other academic units, and their counterparts in teacher education programs elsewhere. What does this mean? Is this teacher education program troubled? Or, are its student teachers simply more troublesome?

These intentionally provocative questions frame the inquiry undertaken here. The situation, captured at the focal point of conflict - the 'complaint department,' is presented within the context of a large and venerable institution being called to account by a relatively small and, for all intents and purposes, insignificant group of individuals.
Modes of Inquiry

Our guiding question will be, “What’s going on here?” In this sense, we will not be problem solving, so much as problematizing; that is, making visible the structures and factors that are usually taken for granted. In the process we will advance better, more complete ways of understanding the situation or literature we are studying that may, in return lead to recommendations or solutions. However, we should avoid a rush to solutions for fear of over-simplifying situations that are complex and multidimensional (Pratt, 1998b, emphasis added).

Functionalism seeks to provide “rational explanations and practical solutions to practical problems” (Boshier, 1994, p92). It emphasizes empirical measurement and objectivity. But what are the limits of quantitative analysis in this instance? Comparing the number of complaints from Education students with those from student colleagues elsewhere on campus is problematized by the university’s immense diversity. Academic units are numerous, and comprise a multitude of sub-units. Some are exceedingly small with few students. Others are enormous, with literally thousands. Departments also have different “personalities.” Some are of the traditional ivory tower variety - scholarly and contemplative. Others, such as those serving as gateways to lucrative high-tech careers, tend to be more business-like in style and function. And academic cultures and pedagogic techniques which might serve to foster satisfaction in one setting and discord in another vary extensively across disciplines.

What about student teachers in programs elsewhere across Canada? There, too, direct
comparison is problematic. Education policy comes under provincial jurisdiction. Regulations and procedures differ across the country, especially with regard to social-economic policy and labour-relations. The activities of teachers' unions and other governing bodies similarly vary. For instance, British Columbia's College of Teachers is relatively assertive, having mounted legal challenges to teacher education programs at both Trinity Western University (TWU) and the University of British Columbia (UBC). The Province of Saskatchewan, on the other hand, does not have a corresponding organization.

Programs vary in size, and institutional responses to internal conflict also differ. Lanier and Little (1986), for instance, have characterized faculties of education which enjoy high status within their respective institutions as being relatively open and responsive, with those held in relatively low esteem by their university's scholarly community being "more conformist" and "inflexible" (in Ducharme, 1986).

Ombuds offices receiving student complaints themselves differ in function, style, and structure. Some are well established, professional, and mandated to serve the broad university community, including staff and faculty. Others are modestly funded, narrowly focused, and amateurish with inexperienced, poorly trained student staff. Degrees of institutional recognition, authority (if any), levels of access, quality of service, reporting methods, and caseloads vary widely.

And, some university campuses are simply more conflicted than others. Levels of general
student dissatisfaction fluctuate from school to school, and between regions. For instance, a comparison of eight major Canadian institutions showed students at UBC expressing least agreement with the statement, “I am satisfied with my decision to attend this university” (Hawkey, 1995).

Hence, with respect the foregoing, quantitative analysis in this instance is of limited value. Accordingly, this study favours a subjective-interpretivist approach. But subjective studies are also vulnerable to criticism, especially with respect to observer bias, and this exercise is perhaps particularly so due to author’s conspicuous role as ‘complaint handler.’ Indeed, Bowling and Hoffman (2000), alluding to the “Hawthorne effect” (Gillespie, 1991), state that “an intermediary’s presence exerts a powerful influence on the way people involved in conflict react to one another” (p11).

However, the Ombudsperson’s role as author in a study of this nature need not be precluded. Christians (2000) citing Weber (1904/1949) points out that all relevant scholarly investigation is initiated by persons who, by virtue of human nature, are predisposed to some degree or another with respect to the nature of their inquiry. Plainly put, people tend to study things of interest to them.

Without the investigator’s conviction regarding the significance of particular cultural facts, every attempt to analyze concrete reality is meaningless (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p137).
Indeed, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have declared that “the concept of the aloof observer [in research] has been abandoned” (p17). Lincoln and Guba, moreover, wrote:

... objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imaginations of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p181).

Universities worldwide generally demand strict adherence to guidelines governing research, both to optimize validity and to protect subjects. Investigators are consequently obliged to observe certain constraints. Academic ombudspersons, additionally bound by codes of ethical practice, especially with regard to confidentiality, are doubly restricted when writing about case-related situations (Warters, 2000; ACCUO, 2001; UCOA, 2000).

Interviews with visitors typically are unrecorded, and notes are usually kept to a minimum, with the current trend in ombuds practice being to destroy them after a week or two (Gadlin, 2000). Private conversations with respondents, witnesses, and other interested parties are similarly “off the record.”

Ombuds offices have consequently sometimes been facetiously likened to “black-holes” into which peoples’ concerns disappear never to be heard from again (AMS, 2001b, p2). But strict adherence to norms governing confidentiality does not necessarily mean that important, critical information cannot be divulged.
Ombuds have the underlying responsibility to identify points at which an organization [or government] and its conflict resolution system are inefficient, biased, unresponsive, unfair, untrustworthy, or otherwise inadequate, and to function as a change agent in calling attention to those areas and making recommendations for system change (Wagner, 2000, p113).

Journal articles and reports by Shelton (2000), Lancaster (2000) Hoffman (1999) and Bauer (1999, 2000) each exemplify the ombuds community’s usage of composite, altered, modified, or otherwise “sanitized” versions of events as appropriate devices by which essential truths can be communicated while effectively concealing the identity of participants.

But sanitization into material suitable for publication often requires a healthy measure of creativity. Can a creative work, such as a fictionalized narrative, or a “story,” qualify as valid social science research? Some believe so. Denzin (2000), citing the emerging acceptance of other unconventional modes of representation such as dance, music, and theatre, maintains that the legitimacy of autobiographical, narrative, and fictionalized literary constructions in social science research is today “taken for granted” (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p17). Novels, for example, have been accepted as Ph.D. dissertations in education research in recent years (Dunlop, 1999; Sellito, 1991). And, Rasberry (2001) cited Leggo (1998) in defending his use of poetry as a principal mode of representation.

Others, nonetheless, remain skeptical. Robert Shelton, Professor of Religious Studies and
Ombudsperson at the University of Kansas, in registering reservation stated:

Fictive accounts [might] be interesting in an article of general discussion on such issues, but even if you totally protected [complainants'] identities, I assume there are still reliability issues in the use of such information in a study (e-mail, 20 Nov. 2000).

Lincoln and Guba, however, relate research “reliability” to “authenticity,” and maintain that the latter can be achieved by applying principles of “honesty and fairness,” with fairness being viewed as “a quality of balance.” That is, “all stockholders' views, perspectives, claims, concerns, and voices should be apparent in the text” (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p180).

Accordingly, Whiney Student Teachers: An Outside Perspective strives to present a fair and balanced view of the situation. Its intended purpose is to enhance empathy among participants, and to promote positive opportunities for adult learning - not to point fingers, criticize, blame, or otherwise suggest how teacher education “ought” to be conducted.
Additional Perspectives

Ombudspersons are “outsiders” (Wagner, 2000), and the author in this instance particularly so (Becker, 1966). The view of an organization or institution from outside is naturally oblique, not unlike watching a baseball game through a knot-hole in centre-field. One is “removed” from the action, “sight-lines” are obscured, as are the sounds, the smells, and the run of play. Contrastingly, however, observation from without is perhaps less vulnerable to distortion by community pressure, collegiality, institutional loyalty, adherence to convention, and other proximity-related factors.

Ombuds offices on campuses are focal points of student discontent. Complaints received generally involve perceptions regarding the way professors or departmental administrators have dealt with, or not dealt with, various contentious issues.

Ombuds offices at universities are like “barometers” in that they are uniquely positioned to monitor the learning environment’s “atmospheric pressure.” Measurements may predict a climate of healthy human interaction, exhuberant debate, and boisterous creative tension? Or, they might be symptomatic of a deeper, hitherto undiagnosed malaise?

Minutes arising from a meeting of the university’s Senate Committee on Academic Policy paraphrase the views of a senior Humanities professor concerning students’ general perceptions with
To summarize, the Ombuds Office at a major Canadian reports having received an “excessive” number of complaints from student teachers over the past decade. The vast majority were seen to involve mature adults; that is, not “traditional” students in their early twenties seeking to augment recently received baccalaureate degrees (AMS, 2001b, p15).

This inquiry consequently tends to view the situation from an “adult learning” perspective. “Lifelong-learning” is an expansive concept currently in the foreground of contemporary adult education (ADED) discourse which embrace older, mature, “non-traditional” age engagement with
higher education (Schuetze, 2000; Adamanti-Trache et al, 2000; Rubenson, 2000). Lifelong-learning is seen to comprise a diverse assortment of educational processes occurring continually or recurrently throughout life, in various settings, both formal and informal, and with a multiplicity of individual ends, means, and motivations.

An undergraduate degree has become a precondition for many previously mundane forms of employment, and the number demanding even more advanced certification is rapidly expanding. Indeed, contemporary economic and technological reality is such that mature adults are increasingly being required to further their education in order to qualify for personal and career advancement (OECD, 1999; Avedon, 1995).

The human-resource model in education, however, has numerous critics (Collins, 1995; et al). The contemporary marketplace’s “emphasis on placing human capital before human values” is similarly not without challengers (Walters, 1997). Welton (1997), for instance, cites both the emergent global hegemony of neoconservative economic trends and policies, and the consequent “need to radically rethink the meaning of work and learning.”

Post-secondary entrance requirements, mirroring contemporary economic trends, have become increasingly competitive, especially at highly regarded institutions. The transformation from “elite” to “mass” higher education in past decades served to open the door for more and more students (Schuetze, 2000). Enrolments continue to expand, and the relative abundance of
qualified applicants currently serves to preclude the routine re-admission to university of stu-
dents with a proven history of failure.

Failure or withdrawal in mid-life from a program of post-baccalaureate study is thus a formidable
obstacle for those hoping to improve their condition through advanced certification. Expenses
associated with higher education are also rising. Non-traditional age students, especially those
with work and dependent care responsibilities, are under increasingly intense financial pressure to
succeed (Rosen and Wilson, 1999). Consumerist attitudes towards education have consequently
intensified, particularly among the non-traditional cohort (Barnetson, et al, 1999).

Cross (1981) has identified a variety of “institutional” and “situational” barriers to successful
adult learning. Home (1998) similarly cited the deleterious effects of oscillation between the
“multiple roles” necessarily assumed by students with additional employment and family re-
sponsibilities. Schmidt and Knowles (1994) have in part credited unsuccessful students’ diffi-
culties to “underdeveloped conceptions of instructional techniques and management methods”
(p441). Feelings of shyness, unassertiveness, and low self-esteem can often also aid in facilita-
ting failure (Crozier & Garber-Jones, 1996).

Advanced education increasingly is seen to involve a mental-health dimension. Adult students
typically view failure as “a measure of incompetence rather than as a healthy function of
learning” (Schmidt & Knowles, 1994, p440). The frustration of “not knowing” can exacerbate
existing symptoms of emotional and psychological distress. Indeed, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Ombudsperson Dr. Mary Rowe has reported that many visitors to her office are “quasi-delusional,” and that an increasing minority still are “fully delusional” and “dangerously unstable” (Rowe, 1994).

Quasi-delusional complainants are characterized as often charming and skilled in manipulating others.

The quasi-delusional person may tell each new complaint handler that “this is the first time anybody has given me a fair hearing. There may be a detailed or troubling story of how previous managers and complaint handlers have refused all reasonable help or attention. A typical complainant of this type communicates that he or she feels deeply betrayed by the person or institution or system that is the object of complaint, or may communicate this sense of betrayal as part of a counter-complaint, if a complaint has been brought against him or her . . . One is likely to hear a story of urgency, about some calamity that will happen unless appropriate action is taken (p3).

Learning how to handle difficult people can itself be difficult. Even the most annoying, hard to deal with individual “might still be telling the truth” (p3). Accordingly, though perhaps understandably so inclined, administrators and complaint handlers are encouraged to “resist labelling people” (p2).

Teacher education processes, by their nature, involve numerous human interactions. Opportunities for adult learning consequently abound, for everyone, including educators and administrators, and especially with regard to “people work” (Cervero & Wilson, 1996).
Argyris (1991), however, posits that smart people “frequently are least able to learn.” It is suggested that persons unfamiliar with learning-related failure, such as successful professionals for whom academic success has been relatively effortless, are “prone to defensive reasoning” when dealing with others perceived to be of lesser ability, or those who have for some reason been unable to produce similarly outstanding results.

Accordingly, it has also been suggested that educators of adults, no less than teachers of children, have a continuing responsibility to be aware of, reflect upon, and apply principles of best practice (Connelly & Light, 1991; Sork & Welock, 1992; CAEO, 1993; Sork, 1996; Caffarella, 1998, Cervero & Wilson, 1996).

To be a teacher is to wield a double-edged sword; one can wound as well as awaken. We can’t always take the ideal approach for each learner. We can’t always comprehend what effect our actions must have. But unless we are mindful that our actions can injure, not only can we do a great deal of damage, we may not even be aware of it (T’Kenye, 1998, in Pratt, 1998, p158).

Teacher educators and administrators of teacher education programs, though committed to the “idea” of reflective practice, are nonetheless constrained in their attempts to be more responsive to the needs of unsuccessful interns by their own need to be mindful of in locus parenti, a legally constituted code of professional conduct designed to protect the interests of minor children.

Brown and Zuker (1998) have cited “a debate raging among teacher educators between progressivist and protectivist points of view” (p166). Barnett (1992), though discounting
arguments in favour of giving the welfare of the intern priority over the welfare of the pupil as
"unjustifiable," nonetheless calls for the application of "rational and sensitive" ways of helping
student teachers cope with practicum failure. Clarke and Riecken (2001) have correspondingly
proposed alternatives such as the formation of teacher educator "associations" to early on detect
and diffuse potentially damaging dynamics.

Functionaries at various levels of organization, in addition to ongoing performance related stress,
are subject to the tedium of repetitive daily practice. And private, personal circumstances can
also negatively influence work-related conducts and behaviour. An individual's ongoing commit­
ment to reflective practice is thus under continual pressure, and will, over time, naturally erode as
if worn down by gravity and friction. Less than optimum relations are consequently the norm
(Moore, 1996). Indeed, organizational studies have shown that managers typically spend 25% to
30% of their time dealing with issues directly related to conflict (Dana, 1984). Such is the human
'cost of doing business.'

Western society's commitment to individual rights and freedom of self expression would seem to
presume a degree of social discord. And indeed, the absence of conflict has throughout history
more often served to confirm the utility of suppression and the effectiveness of totalitarian ad­
ministrative methods. How much can we handle? How much do we need?

In closing, this section offers an analogy culled from contemporary International Relations (IR)
theory. **Peace dividend** is a modern geopolitical term describing the social and economic benefits accruing to countries with reputations for friendliness, political stability and fair dealing (Vargas, 1996; Gleditsch, 1996; Hartley, 1993). The “bonus” to societies stemming from reduced levels of domestic discord, though typically neither large nor immediate, has nonetheless over time proven to be real, broadly distributed, and long term (Vargas, 1996, pp292-303).

If less conflict is good for business, can it be bad for learning?
Methodology

To problematize is to engage a group in the task of codifying reality into symbols which can generate critical consciousness (Heaney, 1995).

Numerous theories persist as to how adults receive, perceive, accumulate, filter, file, retrieve, analyze, and otherwise process information. Cognitive constructivism, situated cognition, internalization, appropriation, proximal development, and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) are among a surfeit of technical terms describing the various psychological, socio-cultural, and socio-linguistical concepts that are today "challenging and competing with one another" for recognition by education theorists and practitioners alike (Nuthall, 1997, p2).

Human beings, however, remain most fundamentally motivated by "the need to make sense of experience" (p18).

Telling a story about what happened is the mechanism by which the component parts of an experience get put together into a single entity. Narrative is the organizing structure of memory. In a sense, experience does not exist until we tell others and ourselves a story about it. By giving it a plot, we give it meaning (p94).

Part Two of this study, The Story, is a fictionalized account of the author’s experience both as an adult student, and as a complaint handler at university. The university under consideration remains unidentified in the text. Neither is its geographical location revealed. Moreover, except
where specifically indicated, identifying personal characteristics of individuals inhabiting the text have been obscured, combined, blended, omitted, morphed, or otherwise altered in order to conform with guidelines regarding the protection of privacy and confidentiality. The various circumstances, situations, and events portrayed are similarly presented in alternate settings or skewed chronological sequence. The deck has been repeatedly re-shuffled, both in order to optimize compliance, and to discourage speculation.

The resulting narrative comprises three parts, like individual movements in a musical arrangement, each a collage of vignettes designed to engage, inform, even to amuse, but primarily to stimulate praxis.

1. **Locating the Observer** examines the author’s formative years and his subsequent ‘later in life’ engagement with higher education. Signs of personal bias are exposed, and the study’s “subjective point of reference” is fixed (Boshier, 1994).

2. **Becoming an Ombudsperson** describes ‘complaint handling’ at university.

3. **Whiney Student Teachers**, the study’s primary narrative, is a fictionalized account of the author’s experience dealing with student teacher complainants.

“Praxis” is a concept central to Freirean “emancipatory” education. It comprises a recurring
cycle of reflection upon practice ideally leading towards “critical consciousness” (Freire, 1970, 1973). Emancipatory, or liberatory education challenges the hegemony of “conventionally produced” knowledge, and encourages learners to participate in their education, not merely “uncritically adapt” themselves to it. Critical consciousness is identified as a “level of awareness” characterized by a “depth” of understanding considered unattainable through intellectual effort alone, but by the concurrent exercise of other, less tangible human qualities (Heaney, 1995).
PART TWO: THE STORY

Locating the Observer

... all individuals come to the communicative process from their own vantage point or "location," where words and understandings have been constructed from their own experience. It is incumbent upon ombuds to recognize those limitations. If ombuds truly wish to operate "outside," to have no vested interests, then they must be aware of the "interests" their own backgrounds imply (Schaffer, 1999, p55).

I was born in suburban London, England in 1949. There, the aftermath of World War Two lingered well into the 1950s. I remember food rationing coupons as a very young child (meat, butter, and eggs), the thick concrete bomb shelter in the playground at school, and the corrugated iron sheds in the park across the street to which families from razed neighbourhoods in central sections of the city had been "temporarily" relocated during the Blitz a decade earlier.

My working-class parents' attitudes towards education were rooted in "between the wars" Britain, a socially stratified society anchored in post-Victorian mores where only 'certain' people went on to university, and then only to secure entry into one of the established professions.

School children in England during the 1950s were required at age eleven to write a series of exams designed to divide them into two distinct educational streams. Poor or merely average
performance meant automatic relegation to a "secondary modern" high school where the curricu-
lum was primarily technical and work-related. Exemplary performance, on the other hand, meant
going on to grammar school and, perhaps, university. I passed handily.

But, just before I was to don the school's distinctive maroon and blue uniform - our family emi-
grated to Canada. On my first day of class at an Edmonton, Alberta elementary school domina-
ted by the children of Eastern European immigrants, we each wrote comprehensive exams as part
of a district-wide evaluation. Again, I did well. The British school system in the 1950s was re-
garded as generally superior to its "colonial" Canadian counterpart, and Principal Wilson, an
avowed Anglophile, recommended an immediate three grade promotion. I began the day in grade
two, and finished in grade five. My parents, flattered to have their eldest son deemed "brilliant,"
naturally acquiesced. But, life would never again be 'normal.'

We moved about, eventually settling in North Vancouver, British Columbia where I went to high
school. Having "skipped" those earlier grades, my classmates there were naturally much older,
including the girls. It was very difficult socially. I was, even then, an "outsider," and naturally
gravitated towards the company of others on the periphery. Thank goodness I was tall and rea-
sonably athletic.

Getting decent grades without actually trying was easy, and being younger than my peers served
to further enhance the illusion among those in charge that I was academically gifted. Graduating
early, at age fifteen, it was assumed that I would be going on to university immediately. But I had other plans.

Unbeknownst to all, since age fourteen I had been making “five-bucks a night” (and a spaghetti dinner on weekends) playing rhythm guitar with adults in a rock band at a seedy downtown cabaret. On school nights I would say to my parents, “I’m off to the library.” At sixteen I left home to work full-time as a musician.

Early in my career, while travelling as a post-adolescent professional, I met revered blues singer and songwriter Willie Dixon. His legendary Chicago Blues All-Stars, featuring octogenarians Lafayette Leake and Shaky “Big Walter” Horton on piano and harmonica respectively, were on tour in Western Canada, and my youthful rock group was fortunate to share the bill on a number of dates.

Willie, a portly African-American gentleman, then in his early sixties, looked magnificent. Wearing an expensive grey cashmere overcoat with signature Homburg hat and silver tipped ebony walking stick, he beckoned me over to chat during a sound-check one afternoon, presumably having caught our band’s performance the evening before.

“Hey kid,” he said, drawing pensively on an enormous cigar. “You plays mighty fine. Tell me, what do you think about them blues?”
"I love the blues, Mr. Dixon, sir," I answered respectfully, "but, as a white Canadian teenager from the suburbs, I feel a bit uncomfortable about the commercial appropriation of an oppressed racial minority's cultural identity."

"Son," he said, "that's a load of crap. A man don't have to be black to play the blues. Just be yourself. And remember this. If anyone, anywhere, anytime, ever hassles you about playing the blues, just tell them that Mr. Willie Dixon from Chicago, Illinois gave you his personal permission."

It was a defining moment, with life altering consequences. "Authorization" to play the blues from Willie Dixon himself, a seminal figure and venerated icon within the genre, was simultaneously a licence and an imperative. It signified legitimacy as an artist, and afforded peripheral access to a more seasoned community of practice. With Willie's expressed "permission," I felt more comfortable engaging veteran players. Their acceptance, though naturally guarded at first, generated increased confidence which in turn effected greater skill, and from greater skill grew yet more confidence. The object of my resolve as a professional musician came into ever clearer focus.

I toured from coast to coast with numerous aggregations over the next several decades, and more than a modicum of commercial and artistic success accrued. Multi-platinum sales and other symbols of recording industry recognition afforded opportunities to perform at prestigious
venues across Canada and throughout the United States, from New York to Los Angeles, Chicago to Kansas City, Memphis, St. Louis, Atlanta, New Orleans, Dallas, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and countless other towns and cities in between. The experience was both artistically fulfilling and economically rewarding.

Along the way I became familiar with the entertainment industry’s “dark side,” a sordid netherworld of rapacious agents, lawyers, managers, accountants, promoters, record company executives, labour unions, extortionists, contract killers, and pimps. In short, it was an education - not the kind one gets at university perhaps, but far more expensive.

The early 1980’s brought upheaval to the music business. Excesses stemming from decades of unchecked corporate expansion, corruption, “payola,” and bloated production budgets sent the industry into a predictable tailspin. Half the record companies worldwide went bankrupt. Those that managed to survive were eventually subsumed under the global hegemony of the “big-five”: Sony, BMG, EMI-Capitol, Polygram, and Time-Warner. Punk and New Wave emerged to challenge mainstream “dinosaur” Rock and Roll. What was once fashionable and exciting was suddenly old and out of date, and entire artist rosters were terminated en masse.

Attrition took its toll, and many musicians took the cyclical downturn as a timely signal to get out of the business. Others chose to switch sides and themselves became managers and agents. But not me. I still had the “the blues.” And I mean the “real blues,” not the cheap, ersatz
version propagated by weekend wankers and hacks. Hell is surely “full of amateur musicians” (G. B. Shaw, 1903).

Unfinished Business

I had been a working musician for thirty of my forty-five years, and was playing better than ever. Why on Earth would I all of a sudden want to go to school and get an education? The truth is, my wife Leslie, who had been attending college part-time, challenged me to join her, suggesting that I was perhaps “not smart enough” to keep up. Plus, we figured that mommy and daddy going to school together might be a good example for the kids, by then numbering three.

I’d considered higher education numerous times over the years, but was a musician after all, and didn’t really want to be anything else. What would I do? What courses would I take? Leslie, correctly pointing out that many diverse academic programs share first year requirements, offered to use her familiarity with the college to find me an ‘ideal’ instructor for entry level English.

He and I connected right away. We were a great “fit.” But my initial attempts at writing were hobbled by needless “fancy-bits.” “Talk to me!” he would exhort in the margins, “Say what you mean!” and “Resist the baroque!” Suitably chastened, I did better, finishing with a confidence building A+. 
Flush with initial success, I made an appointment with the college’s counselling department to discuss a specific program of study - a major. On my first visit, an efficient young advisor immediately attempted to steer me towards “the rapid acquisition of instrumental skills designed to get you back in the work force right away.” It was more than a bit off-putting. I wasn’t there to get a job. I already had one, such as it was. What I looking for was a university education, and I felt that I was being sold short. So, a second interview was arranged at which a similarly businesslike human resources “expert” suggested that, at age forty-five, I was too old to begin a lengthy degree program.

“Come now, sir, why would you be interested in a B.A.? You’re forty-five now, and would be over fifty when you finish - and that’s IF you finish! Do you have any idea how many people drop out? You’d be much better off with a short course of study leading to immediate employment, something practical that you can use right away.”

Insisting on yet another interview, I was introduced to a gentleman in his late fifties. We discussed our respective backgrounds. His had been in the military. I told him I was a music business veteran looking to take care of some “unfinished business.”

He leaned over and smiled, “Good for you, mister!” he said, “Go for it! Getting an education is like taking public transit. It doesn’t matter where you’re going, where you get on, or when you get on, just as long as you manage to get on. And if when you’re on the bus you come to an
interesting part of town, get off, walk around, and check out the neighbourhood. You can always get back on the bus if you want, the same one, or another one going in a different direction - but only if you remember to get a transfer. And don’t forget that your transfer will expire after a while, so you have to keep your eye on the clock and make good choices. Good luck, and have a pleasant trip.”

I applied to a program in the college’s Faculty of Arts emphasizing East Asian geography, history, languages, and political economy, and a few weeks later received a phone call at home from a faculty representative.

“We’re sorry,” he said, “but the department has grave misgivings about an older gentleman such as yourself being able to interact effectively with much younger classmates, and cannot approve your enrolment at this time.”

“How ironic,” I thought, recalling my initial education experience as the perennial “youngster.”

“Stay right there!” I said, quickly hanging up the phone. Firing up the Volvo, I raced across town against rush-hour traffic to confront the official. He was reminded that the province’s Human Rights Code prohibits unfair discrimination with regard to a person’s age.

“And besides,” I offered, “as a lifelong working musician, I’m really quite immature.”
Admission was granted.

I'd done reasonably well as a musician and recording artist over the years, but not that well. Though comfortable, all things considered, we were still far from wealthy. And, as the children inexorably progressed into young adulthood, household expenses expanded commensurately. Our financial resources, such as they had become, were shrinking rapidly.

Moreover, shifting audience demographics and advances in home entertainment technology concurrently conspired to diminish opportunities for veteran musicians to play “in-town.” Lucrative offers to take a band “on the road” consequently became impossible to resist, and I was forced to be away from class for lengthy periods, and often at key times during the term.

Playing music on the road and attending college full-time involve entirely divergent mind-sets. I was repeatedly required to switch back and forth between domains. Optimal performance in each naturally suffered.

I learned, however, to approach instructors at the beginning of each term to apologize in advance for missing classes, explaining my situation rationally, and with respect for their time and effort. Each without exception consented to accommodate certain logistical “irregularities” as long as I promised to keep up with assignments and maintain decent grades. Occasionally, of course, overall fairness to my fellow classmates would render accommodation inappropriate, and I would
be obliged to yield a percentage penalty.

I studied Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and South East Asian cultures, their history, geography, political economy, languages, and ethnic literature in translation. I attended lectures daily with classmates less than half my age, from a broad variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For a ‘mature white male’ (MWM) such as myself, the experience was “transformational” in a truly Mezirovian (1990, 1993) sense.

A course in International Relations (IR) examined post WW2 politics, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the Arms Race, etc. For my much younger classmates it was ancient history. I came to appreciate that being older comes with “baggage.” That is, attitudes and preconceptions which over the years accumulate and bind one to a particular “world-view.” I learned to be more sceptical of my own understandings and beliefs.

The program’s Asian language component was both time consuming and difficult, but my Mandarin instructor was first rate. Besides being the only mature adult student in class, I was also the only non-Asian. My classmates mainly comprised young, second generation Canadians of southern Chinese decent attempting to score an easy three credits. The written Chinese characters - tiny, poorly printed smudges in a flimsy rice-paper textbook from the English Language Institute in Beijing, were particularly hard to read. Eye strain would routinely escalate into huge, paralysing, day-long migraines (vanity having precluded the wearing of reading glasses).
Consequently, I became a regular visitor to the college's modest, centrally located medical clinic, where I struck up a friendship with the Head Nurse who, at my periodic request, would provide mild medication and an empty examination room in which to take a timely nap between classes.

In the meantime, back at the ranch, our children too were attending school. My calculations reveal that Leslie and I have between us accumulated seventy-eight "parent-years" of experience with the public school system (2 adults x 3 kids x K-12). Each followed their elder sibling at three year intervals, in the same schools, in the same neighbourhood.

And, they weren't exactly angels. We were "called to the Office" on more than several occasions over the years. But, being reasonably active in everyday school affairs, especially in the early and middle grades, we enjoyed excellent relations with most of their teachers, even maintaining social contact with several beyond promotion, transfer, or eventual retirement.

Schools can be close-knit communities. Parents will naturally gather after concerts or sports events to talk about their children's various experiences. It had become apparent to several of us that Ms. X, a veteran English teacher, had in past months become increasingly impatient, short-tempered, and dismissive - even rude. Moreover, she was reported to have made derisive comments about several of her students, and in particular to have expressed marked antipathy towards "big dumb jocks."
Our eldest son Beau, besides being an above-average student, in grade twelve stood 6’ 7,” weighed over 220 lbs, and was an all-star varsity athlete. Leslie and I couldn’t help noticing that, whereas Beau’s scores on district-wide administered English exams over the years had been consistently high, his marks in Ms. X’s grade twelve class for some reason remained comparatively low. When questioned, he would only say:

“She hates me. Nothing I do is ever good enough for her.”

As full-time adult students, we had also become keenly aware that the evaluation of written work naturally involves a degree of subjectivity. That is, marking an essay is not the same as simply scanning a multiple choice exam. An evaluator’s underlying values and beliefs will naturally come into play (Pratt, 1998).

In addition, with limited resources, we were particularly sensitive to the economic consequences of getting poor grades in the final year of high school. Achieving first class standing across the board in grade twelve is critical for students applying to first year university, especially at schools where entry requirements are particularly high. Scholarship eligibility and access to advance registration are equally at risk.

Conversations with the parents of other students in Ms. X’s class revealed that Beau’s scores on in-class essays were invariably lower than those attained by classmates whose scores in district-
wide exams he had far surpassed. That is, Ms. X’s teacher colleagues, in blind evaluations, consistently held Beau’s written work in higher regard than she did.

An appointment was requested so that we might ask Ms. X if she would consider reviewing several key assignments. We met in the library after school. The woman was obviously in severe physical pain. Declining to sit, she instead shuffled impatiently back and forth, pausing periodically to lean against the wall. Our petition was not well received.

Grimacing through clenched teeth, she explained how the combination of a serious back injury and strong pain medication, plus the added stress of pending surgery, a recent divorce, and the unexpected death of her mother had left her with “little patience for such goings on”. Insisting that an academic review would serve “absolutely no purpose,” and dismissing our concerns as “insulting nonsense,” she then brusquely excused herself, and hobbled out.

The following evening, while at a Senior Boys basketball game in the school’s gymnasium, I approached the Principal, herself an ardent supporter of student athletics. At half-time we repaired to her office where I “officially” requested an independent review of Beau’s work. Candidly acknowledging Ms. X’s “tremendous suffering of late,” she confirmed that several other parents had made similar requests.

“\textit{I was hoping to buy her some time so she could deal with her personal problems, strictly as a}
professional courtesy, of course, but I can see things have gone far enough.”

Beau’s work was re-evaluated, his grade adjusted upward, and he was subsequently granted advance registration in first year university with scholarship eligibility intact. Six years later, the teacher remains at the school, and is in fact now the Head of the English Department. Her back injury has healed. She is remarried, expecting a child, and happy.

The moral of this story is: “Even good people sometimes behave poorly.” I know I have.

Our middle child Ian floated through school with little trouble, but our youngest, daughter Kelly, encountered some unfortunate difficulty. She was in grades three and four when changes to the way children were taught to read and write were being implemented. The change in policy reflected an education industry trend away from the traditional “phonics” approach and towards something called “whole-word” learning. At least, that’s how it was explained to Kelly’s mother and me at the time.

In grade four, Kelly’s spelling began to appear a bit underdeveloped in comparison to her older brothers’ command at the same age. We sought the opinion of experts at both the school and district level. “This is to be expected,” they said. “She’ll grow through it. Relax. Everything will work out.”
But it didn’t “work out.” It got worse. And, not least in our view because her grade five teacher, naively believing the assignment of letter grades as a measure of a child’s performance to be “negative,” and “discriminatory,” instead chose to offer only warm and fuzzy, positive words of encouragement. Of course, Leslie and I were happy that Kelly was “working hard,” “cooperating with others,” and “displaying enthusiasm,” but her spelling at year’s end showed little or no improvement, and grade six was equally disappointing.

In grade seven, when she began to vent frustrations at not being able to keep pace with her classmates, comprehensive testing disclosed that, while perfectly normal and healthy in every other physical and intellectual respect, Kelly could not read up to grade level.

We engaged a private tutor, a retired teacher with a vested interest in traditional methods, and her skills improved to a degree. But, most distressingly, she couldn’t fully recover from the loss of self-esteem and confidence, especially occurring as it did during a highly formative period in her life, and high school was exceedingly difficult.

Leslie and I sought explanations. Officials eventually conceded that our daughter had simply “fallen through the cracks.” Ironically, these were the same professionals who several years earlier had earnestly insisted that the original changes had to be made because, under the old method, “too many children were falling through the cracks.”
I was then forty seven years of age, and in two years of continuous study had accumulated fifty four transferable credits. Momentum is essential to mature adult students’ academic progress. Time is running out, and “bogging down” means certain death. It’s literally “swim, or sink.” Leslie, a full year ahead of me and already attending university, suggested that, despite being six-credits short of a diploma, it was time to shift gears and move on up to the “Big House.”

A bachelor’s degree from the Faculty of Arts at “the Big House” normally comprises twelve-credits of foreign language instruction. I already had two full terms invested in college level Chinese. But the university didn’t offer a continuing course at my rudimentary level that would satisfy the minimum degree requirement.

Consequently, in order to effect a successful transfer without squandering six hard earned credits, I needed permission to continue attending one Chinese language class per week at college while enrolled full time in third year at the university - something called “concurrent study.” I tried to explain my request to the clerk on duty in the advising office.

“No,” she indicated, firmly. “It’s against the rules, forget it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am.”
“Can I please speak with someone else?”

“Why?”

“Well, with every respect, perhaps you’re misinformed.”

“No, I’m not. And, no you can’t.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes I am, and besides, the advisors are all busy.”

“What about him?” I said, pointing over to an open office door, behind which a gentleman, leaning back in his chair with one foot up on his desk, appeared to be reading a book.

“He’s busy.”

“No, he’s not,” I said, astounded by her apparent unwillingness to cooperate.

“Yes, he is!” she insisted.
“Can you check?”

“Excuse me, sir” she hissed back, obviously annoyed. “If you don’t leave immediately, I’m going to have to call security.”

The advisor, a senior professor on summer duty, looked up from his reading and, to the clerk’s palpable consternation, waved me over. Closing the office door behind us, he invited me to sit. I repeated the reason for my visit.

“Chinese eh?” he said. “Very interesting. Sure, I don’t see why not. Drop by same time tomorrow and pick up an official letter of approval.”

We chatted briefly about my academic goals. “If you’re looking for a major,” he offered, “you might want to consider Political Science. We’re really not so bad” (alluding to a controversial report involving allegations of systemic racism and sexism).

Intrigued, I dropped by the next day to speak with an undergraduate advisor. Noting my “obvious” maturity, and presuming a corresponding familiarity with contemporary Canadian history and politics, she made me ‘an offer I couldn’t refuse,’ waiving all remaining uncompleted first year degree requirements.
Transfer was complete. I was in. And, with a major no less. The “Big-House” was monstrously huge in comparison to the little community college I’d been attending, and the first day of classes was, needless to say - daunting. Traversing the crowded plaza in front of the library, a grey-haired rookie undergrad simply trying to get to class on time, I felt a tap on my shoulder, and turned.

“Excuse me, professor,” asked the young woman. “Could you tell me how to get to the Commerce Building.”

The Politics of Learning

Maintaining an Asian focus, I signed up for a course on Chinese politics. Each day the instructor would stand by the classroom door, and close it precisely on the hour to bar late entry - just like at college, or even back in high school for that matter. Nothing innovative, no high-tech presentations or small group discussions. His pedagogy comprised the standard three, non-stop, fifty minute lectures per week, and required taking voluminous carpal-tunnel syndrome inducing notes.

But he was a gifted storyteller, and it was far from boring. Three classes were devoted to Mao Zedong thought, each equally outstanding. We learned about Imperial China, The Great March, factionalism within the Politburo, the people and personalities involved, and speculated on who might succeed Deng Xiao Ping as paramount leader. Tienanmen, anyone?
His strictly "transmissive" style might have seemed regimented and tedious to some, but the man's pedagogical "performance" was outstanding, and I told him so. Everyone likes compliments. I know I do. His was borne with dignified modesty.

I was introduced to political theory, from the classics to the enlightenment liberals and their contemporary communitarian and feminist critics. I began to comprehend the variety, depth, and historical context of arguments in support of everyday rights and freedoms we in the West have come to take for granted.

I also came to better appreciate the nature of social and economic class, of privilege, power, and tensions between opposites, such individual and collective interests, the arts and sciences, form and function, style and content, and between the "high hard ground" of theory and the "swampy field" of practice. We discussed the history of formal education and the evolution of the university in western society. And, I came to understand that there is no more political an act than that of education.

Education is one of the ways the ruling classes perpetuate their own privileges and controls. People are socialized to fit in, accept authority, buy into orthodox ways of viewing their lot or place in life (Boshier, 1994, p96).

The question is: "Who decides who gets to teach what, to whom, for what purpose, how, and at what cost?"
Political theory was difficult to fathom and cumbersome to write, and I didn’t do particularly well at first. But the instructor’s evaluative methodology left open a degree of “headroom,” a “bonus” for those students fortunate enough to demonstrate “improvement.” Eventually, after a slow start, and after managing to get a “handle” on a few key concepts, I was rewarded with decent grades.

I had heard that doing well in fourth year seminar courses as an alternative to the standard “three fifty minute lectures a week” format could enhance one’s chances of acceptance to graduate school. So, I signed up for a seminar on First Nations peoples, politics, and the Law. I was pleasantly surprised to find that there were no exams in the course, and that the professor’s enlightened pedagogy allowed students to negotiate different combinations of assignments (long papers, short papers, projects, presentations, etc.) and their evaluative weight. It was stimulating fun, and I came away appreciating that there is more than “one way” to teach, and to learn.

I received my B.A. in 1998, following four years of intensive, full-time study. It had been a long, hard, and expensive journey. Thanks to Leslie for getting me started, and to the kids for keeping us on our toes. Kudos to George Tesla, John Webb, Glen Isaac, Brian Pendleton, Rosalyn Scar nell, Mrs. Ying, Jim Placzek and the others at college. Thanks also to Pete, Paul, and Sam in the Political Science Department, and to both the Royal Canadian Legion and university bursary funds for keeping us afloat during difficult times.
Leslie and I have lived near the university for decades, and many neighbourhood acquaintances work there, either as faculty or administrative staff. While chatting one day with a professor in Adult Education whose son I had coached in Little League, the conversation came around to my newly minted B.A. Exhibiting genuine interest, he suggested that I consider contacting a departmental colleague of his responsible for post-graduate admissions.

I called, but felt obliged to confess that I had little interest in becoming a teacher.

"Shouldn't be a problem," the man said. "Frankly, we need to maintain enrolment levels so that the university doesn't have an excuse to further marginalize our operation. Unless you've been convicted of murder, or something more serious, with a B.A. and a good enough GPA you should be all right. You do have good enough grades, don't you?"

"As far as I know," I replied, "but there's something else you should know."

"What's that?" he asked, gamely rising to the bait.

"I'm a musician."

"You poor boy," he volleyed, "how unfortunate." Then, barely dropping a beat, he added, "Hey, we're hosting an international conference this summer and we need some music - do you
have a band?”

“Perhaps,” I replied, masking my growing interest, “How much money do you have?”

“How much do you need?” he countered.

“It depends on what kind of music you want, and how many players. Name your poison.”

We haggled, settled on a fee, and booked the date.

“If you like the band, do I get in?” I quipped.

“It wouldn’t hurt,” he shot back.

Leslie and I joined ADED together that Fall. She, unlike myself, having expressed a strong desire to teach, and especially other adults, has lately gone on to demonstrate considerable talent in that regard. Neither of us at the time, however, had any particular idea what adult education was all about, other than ourselves having recently been mature undergraduates at college and university. But an introductory course explored ADED’s historical, cultural, and political roots, and provided some much appreciated context.
ADED's commitment to ethical best practice was instantly affirming. That is, the behaviours and techniques being taught were, with rare exception, effectively modelled. Thanks to Dan, Roger, Tom, and Hans for their encouragement. Also to Jeannie for her warm spirit and unselfish assistance.
Becoming an Ombudsperson

In my final undergraduate year I enrolled in a political science course taught by an earnest young sessional instructor at least fifteen years my junior doubtless striving to attain continuing employment as an ‘academic.’ A list of topics for a major paper worth 50% of the final grade was circulated mid-term. In-class discussion one day touched upon a particularly stimulating current affairs issue. I approached the instructor immediately after class requesting permission to deviate from the approved list and instead write on that topic - an alternative clearly offered in the course syllabus. He acknowledged the topic’s relevance, and gave verbal permission to proceed. Indeed, I recall that he was enthusiastically in favour of the idea.

“Sounds great,” he said. “I’m looking forward to reading it.”

You can then imagine my surprise when the graded paper was returned with the written comment, “a twenty point penalty has been levied for deviation from the list of approved topics.” I went looking for the instructor and finally managed to locate him in his temporary office.

“Surely it was a mistake,” I offered.

“You should’ve got it in writing,” was the unexpected response.
“Pardon me?” I said, perhaps a bit sharply. “Are you telling me you don’t remember our con-
versation?”

“I vaguely recall something,” he replied, “but that’s the way it goes. Too bad. It was a good
paper.”

“You have got to be kidding?” I said. “I’ve negotiated alternative essay topics with instructors
on numerous occasions, both here at university and at college. Not once did any of them insist
on written documentation. As a matter of fact, I did ask for a ‘receipt’ once, as a rookie student,
and the professor, clearly insulted, asked: ‘Why? Don’t you trust me?’”

“Sorry,” said the instructor. “The marks are in. There’s nothing I can do.”

“That’s worse than unfair!” I protested. “It’s wrong.”

“Well,” he said, pausing to reflect. “Maybe I could ‘revisit’ the situation after the final exam and
make an adjustment at that time. We’ll see.”

Somewhat mollified, but still suspicious, I withdrew. Weeks later, however, when the final
grades were posted, calculations revealed that no such revision had been made. I went looking for
the instructor again, but his office was empty. He was long-gone, down the road, at another
sessional "gig" at another university, in another province, perhaps even another country. Attempts to locate him in transit were futile. My rightfully earned twenty points, essentially the difference between a B and an A+ in the course, were irretrievably lost.

I was livid, and immediately went searching for the "complaint department" to see what, if anything, could be done. But it too, like the elusive instructor, was difficult to find. Unlike virtually every other major Canadian educational institution, the university in question does not have an officially sanctioned ombuds function. The student society, however, used to run a modest little student-run operation out of a dingy, cave-like room at the end of a poorly-lit cul-de-sac off the Student Union Building's main concourse.

I knocked, peeked inside, and looked around. Four or five young women, seemingly oblivious to my intrusion, continued to eat lunch, sip bubble tea, and chat noisily amongst themselves. Disappointed by the clubhouse atmosphere, I retreated to the hallway to consider alternative action, and decided instead to consult a professor with whom I had developed a cordial yet candid personal relationship.

"Get over it!" he said. "Successful students can't afford to dwell on every real or imagined slight. That's the way university works. Grow up!. Be an adult. Shake it off, and move on."

Leslie wisely concurred, pointing out that my GPA, even with the grotesquely unfair penalty,
when calculated over 120+ credits had suffered only minutely, and I was still on track to graduate “first class.”

“Why let it get under my skin?” I decided.

I applied to the Faculty of Graduate Studies, and waited patiently for a response. In the meantime, however, I needed something to keep me busy, like a part-time job. It was son Beau, then in second year Science at the university, who first mentioned that the student society was looking for a new Ombuds Office Director. “Why not?” I thought. It was an intriguing prospect, especially given my earlier visit. The problem was, though being almost fifty, and having worked continually in the same field for over thirty years, I’d never before actually had a “real” job.

I met with the youthful selection committee. “I’m a musician,” I said. “I’ve had a decent career, written some decent tunes, made some records, had some hits, won some awards, and made some decent dough. I’ve played thousands of shows, for thousands of people, in thousands of cities and towns. I’ve played Maple Leaf Gardens, Boston Garden, and Madison Square Garden. I’ve shared the bill with the Grateful Dead, The Velvet Underground, Rod Stewart, Ten Years After and Jethro Tull, Alice Cooper, Fleetwood Mac, Deep Purple, ZZ Top, Ike and Tina Turner, and countless others. I’ve played in Texas with the Beach Boys, Las Vegas with AC/DC, and the Whiskey a Go Go on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood - twice.
And I’ve performed with legends, like Gene Vincent, Gene Pitney, and Roy Orbison. I’ve done “Runaway” with Del Shannon, and “Hey Bo Diddley” with Bo Diddley himself. I learned to play “Stormy Monday Blues” from T-Bone Walker, the man who wrote it. I’ve played “Wang Dang Doodle” with Willie Dixon, and “Johnnie B. Goode” with Chuck Berry.

I’ve played dumps, dives, theatres, arenas, public parks, street corners, and football stadiums - for ten people, and a hundred and ten thousand. I’ve been flattered and feted, and ripped-off and run out of town. I’ve had beer bottles, half empty wine jugs, and tennis balls spiked with nine-inch nails thrown at me on stage. I’ve been up and down, then further down, and back up again, and have learned that there is no substitute for good manners. Yes, I’ve been around the block more than a few times and, frankly, nothing would surprise me.”

Surprisingly, they hired me.

Leslie was skeptical. “You can’t be the Ombudsman,” she said. “That would require a modicum of sensitivity. You’re an asshole.”

“Thanks honey,” I said. “It takes one to know one.”

The position came with a title, a business card, an office with a computer, a phone, and a modest bi-monthly stipend. I also had a small budget for staff, promotion, and professional
development. It was my first ever "straight" gig. Training, however, consisted only of a two page photo-copied manual, a key to the office door, and the codes to the computer.

It was early May. Regular classes were over for the year. Exams were finished. Term papers were all handed in. And most students were headed home for the summer holidays. I was alone in the office, and liked it that way. There would be no more "clubhouse" shenanigans.

The university, in summer, is a pleasant place. And it also operates, with the student population seasonably reduced, at a reasonably sedate pace. Ombuds Office traffic was consequently moderate, and the learning curve thankfully not too steep.

The Faculty of Medicine was drawing some attention with a mounting number of complaints from disgruntled applicants citing late notifications and rude, inconsiderate staff. When the count reached half a dozen, I sent a carefully composed e-mail advisory. A senior administrator phoned back a week later and, blaming cutbacks and seasonal staff shortage, offered her "sincerest apologies" and personal assurance that "everything will be taken care of." The complaints immediately abated.

This was too easy. The next situation involved a student under threat of expulsion for "insubordination." The academic unit in question was working closely with business and government interests in the development of high-tech products. Program administrators alleged that the
student had an "authority problem" and was a "disruptive influence" on classmates. Consequently, they wanted him out of the classroom "immediately."

Tensions had been further inflamed by certain restrictions placed on the student by department officials. For instance, a written directive expressly forbade the complainant from "fraternizing" with fellow students. Feeling "under siege," the student contacted the Ombuds Office for advice.

He insisted that he had merely been expressing legitimate concerns about on-line security, copyright protection, and research ethics. He also strongly maintained that payment of university fees and published university policy regarding the relationship between parties involved in joint research each guaranteed him the right to do so.

It was a tricky situation. The student was threatening legal action unless immediately reinstated. The instructor, seconded from the business community, was equally intransigent. And, departmental representatives were reluctant to recognize the Ombuds Office as a third party to the affair.

"We don't have to talk to you," they said. "You're paid by the student society. You're obviously biased."

But, my research confirmed that academic sub-units cannot issue arbitrary "restraining orders."
Due process is required. I was therefore obliged to approach the program's Director.

We met for lunch at an on-campus bistro. I explained, over quesadillas and coffee, that ombuds don't take sides in disputes but simply exist to make sure that policies and procedures are correctly observed. I noted, with respect to the student's "eccentricities," that there was no established university rule against "being weird," and facetiously ventured that, if there was, a substantial proportion of the university's faculty would likely be in violation.

The Director chuckled, and countered with the program's unique "cost recovery mandate."

"This is cutting edge stuff," he said. "There's a lot at stake, and it's not cheap. Our outside partners insist we do it their way. Stability is essential. Corporate relationships are on the line. We can't have loose cannons running around."

Acknowledging his predicament, I pointed out that students in his "cutting edge" unit paid fees at market value, considerably higher than regular students' taxpayer-subsidized tuition and that, even though the unit operated with a modicum of independence from the university, its students were still university students, with student numbers, and thus entitled to the same protections as others. I also pointed out that the student's program was nearing completion, and that, barring an escalation of hostilities, the unfortunate affair might soon be over.
The Director reluctantly conceded that academic discipline should “be seen” to conform with established, Senate approved procedures. The student was allowed to complete the course via unsupervised independent study, and his work (by all accounts excellent) was evaluated by outside authorities. The instructor was rid of his “disruption.” Nobody was expelled. No one was sued. Things worked out well, despite the shaky start. In fact, the Director later instructed his staff to contact the office should they feel it might aid in stemming the escalation of future hostilities.

The initial successes felt good. Ombudsing seemed like a good fit - not an entirely undignified role for an middle-aged white male bluesician. I dealt with a steady stream of student visitors, about half of whom, like me, were observed belonging to the older, “non-traditional” minority. Mature students, it seems, are generally over-represented among complainants at the university.

In some situations, if I thought it could help, and only at students’ very specific requests, I would attempt to intervene on their behalf. But I soon learned that the student society Ombudsman’s “unofficial” mandate is severely limited. University faculty and administration are in no way compelled to cooperate, or even to respond. I also came to appreciate that not every problem is a real problem, that some problems are more easily fixed than others, and that some problems simply can’t be fixed at all.

Many incidents stemmed from simple miscommunication or misunderstanding, and more than a few involved completely imagined indignities. I discovered that it helps if regulations are
specific and clearly stated. Issues are then easier to explain, and people are more inclined to accept even negative decisions. But the rules too often are administered "with attitude."

It generally comes down to whether persons in authority, those actually in positions to effect solutions, are competent, fair-minded, and friendly. Most are, but some are not. And defensiveness abounds.

For instance, a student in a sub-unit of a major faculty visited the Ombuds Office one day to complain about being penalized for having neglected to submit a term paper worth 50% of the final grade. The student, firmly maintaining that the paper had been handed in on time, insisted that the department "must have lost it."

The department, with supreme confidence in its infallibility, subsequently accused the student of "lying." Moreover, for allegedly "attempting to obtain credit for an unsubmitted paper," he was officially charged with "cheating," and his case forwarded to the university's Committee on Student Discipline. The student, more scared than angry, then contacted the Ombuds Office. My advice was: "If you cheated, come clean. If not, fight it all the way."

I recalled that my wife, as an undergraduate, had submitted an important document worth 100% of a course's grade to clerical staff, and it had gone missing. Deadlines had long since passed, and serious negative academic consequences appeared imminent. But Leslie, certainly not one to
demure in such situations, politely insisted that a comprehensive search be undertaken, and the paper was found to have been placed in the wrong professor’s file.

I suggested to this student that he make a similar request, but he was reticent.

“That’s what got me into trouble in the first place!” he lamented.

Fearing serious consequences, but faced with little alternative, he asked if I would call and prod the department on his behalf. So, I phoned and spoke to a clerk who proceeded to take instant exception to the merest suggestion of incompetence.

“We are a highly regarded department of a major Canadian university,” she snipped. “We simply do not ‘lose’ students’ papers.”

“Could you perhaps double-check?” I asked.

“What for?”

“Well, maybe it’s been misplaced.”

“You don’t believe this person do you?” she said incredulously. “People try to get away with
this sort of thing all the time. My goodness you are gullible."

I explained to the clerk that, as a parent of three grown children, "one of whom attends this uni-
versity," I had heard every excuse imaginable for neglecting to hand in assignments. I also
mentioned Leslie’s "lost" Psychology paper, the one which had miraculously reappeared.

The clerk grudgingly consented to look around, and a week later called back to say that the paper
had been located, and that disciplinary charges against the student would be dropped forthwith.

The student was relieved, and waited patiently pending evaluation. However, several days later
we received a call from a different, somewhat chagrined official.

"I don't know how it happened," he offered sheepishly, "but it seems we've lost it again."

The paper - lost, then found, then lost again - was never recovered. The student was subsequ-
ently graded on his remaining body of work, and passed. He was, however, not unjustifiably
upset.

First, he felt that the lost paper had been "a very good effort," and may well have served to boost
his final score. He was also convinced that the intense emotional strain generated by the threat of
academic discipline during the exam period had caused him to perform poorly in other subjects.
He felt that an apology from the department for the inconvenience and emotional strain was in order, and that an offer of assistance with respect to subsequent accommodation or appeal, should it have proven fair and necessary, would not have been inappropriate. Neither, however, was forthcoming.

The student, having “had enough of this bullshit,” finally expressed his intention to withdraw in favour of attending another institution. Why are universities, and the people that work in them, so reluctant to admit mistakes? Could it be because we live in increasingly litigious times?

I am reminded of the music business, and a visit paid to the famed Capitol Records Tower on Vine Street in Hollywood, an industry landmark. The cavernous lobby, lined with gold and platinum discs by Sinatra, Basie, Streisand, Bennett, the Beachboys, the Beatles, and other legendary entertainers, is a veritable monument to mid-late 20th Century American popular culture.

Our entourage was greeted warmly by the company President, assorted VP’s, department heads and PR staff. We were treated to a catered tour of the facilities, a courtesy extended to all recently signed acts. The A & R (Artist and Repertoire) Department, the administrative unit with complete responsibility for the creation and development of the company’s prized and historically significant musical product, was seen to occupy one entire floor.

The Legal Department occupied three.
Like Capitol Records, the university has an army of lawyers at its disposal, and a generous budget to match. Yes, students are “permitted” to bring lawyers to meetings with officials, or quasi-judicial hearings involving academic appeals or student discipline. But legal representation is expensive, well beyond the resources of most students, and experience has shown that if a student brings one lawyer, the university can afford to bring two, or more.

I have attended several such appeal hearings, not as an advocate, but strictly to provide moral support. One particularly poignant situation involved a foreign gentleman in the final stages of a technically oriented professional program for which the market value fee for international students is treble the domestic rate, or approximately $45,000 annually. The department insisted, allegedly due to his “inadequate command of English,” that an additional full year of training was required. The student in turn maintained that officials had been fully apprised of his language proficiency test results prior to admittance, and that the financial burden to him and his family of repeating a year’s study at this late stage was both punitive and unnecessary. Nervously representing himself before Senate, in a foreign country, in a foreign language, his ultimately unsuccessful solo defense against the combined authority of a faculty’s entire administrative corps was truly something to behold.

Contrastingly, I am reminded also of a situation where a professor’s concern about the potential for litigation instead seemed to play out in a different manner. A student charged with plagiarising a term paper requested that I accompany her to a meeting with her professor. Cursory
inspection revealed that she had, at minimum, completely disregarded basic referencing guidelines. Indeed, entire sections were likely copied.

The professor, a highly regarded rookie on the fast track to tenure, seemed eager to avoid conflict and more inclined towards “making a deal.” The student, perhaps sensing an opportunity, mustered a plethora of excuses, essentially pleading “no contest.” A relatively insubstantial percentage penalty was assessed. All things considered, the consequences could have, and perhaps even should have, been more severe.

The student was understandably delighted. But, sensing that my presence may have inadvertently lent support to the student’s claim of innocence, I felt uncomfortable. Upon leaving I invited the professor to “call if anything similar ever comes up in the future.” I was barely back in my office when she phoned, anxiously seeking my “opinion of how things went.”

“Was I too harsh?” she inquired nervously. “Do you think there might be repercussions. Could I get sued? I certainly hope this doesn’t come back to haunt me.”

I offered assurance that she’d conducted herself professionally, but indicated that, in my view, the student had perhaps “gotten off easy.” Expressing appreciation for the “moral support,” she nonetheless correctly chose to honour the commitment already made, and the nominal penalty stood.
“We’ll just chalk this one up to experience,” she said.

Another instance similarly involved plagiarism. A student faxed a term paper to a professor, well past the assignment’s due date, from a third party fax number, without a cover-page formally identifying himself. The veteran professor, though initially willing to accept the overdue submission, recognized it to be a substantial reproduction of a colleague’s published work. The student ignored repeated requests for the potentially self-incriminating cover page to be forwarded. Sensing that something had perhaps gone awry, he then visited the Ombuds Office to see if someone might “look into things” on his behalf.

“Did you plagiarize?” I inquired.

“No, sir, I did not.”

“Then why don’t you just send him the cover page like he asks?”

“Well, it was a mistake, sir. Somebody else accidently sent him the wrong paper, sir. I don’t trust him. I think he’s up to something, sir.”

“Like what?”
"I don't know sir. I just want to make sure, sir."

"Make sure of what? I don’t understand?"

"Sir, I think he's out to get me, sir."

"First of all," I said. "Stop calling me sir. I'm a student just like you."

I called the professor.

"That obsequious little shit," he said with disarming candour. "I’ve got him dead to rights, and he knows it. But, as you can see, I’ve been stringing him along hoping that he would incriminate himself further by sending me a cover page ‘officially’ claiming the work as his own. However, if he does submit it, and if I then were to forward the case to the Dean for further investigation, a lawyer would have a field day with it and would more than likely get him off for ‘entrapment.’ All I can do now is give him a zero on the paper for being overdue. He would then naturally fail the course, but avoid suspension. If he's smart he'll just walk away from it. If he appeals, he's toast."

The student came by a few days later, "just to see how things are going."
“You dodged a bullet, kid,” I said, resisting the temptation to comment further.

During my second term as ombud I established contact with Canada’s academic ombuds community through a secure internet connection where colleagues can candidly discuss case-related issues. And then, several months later at a national conference, I was finally able to engage my fellow ombuds face-to-face in round-table discussion.

Consensus was that heightened economic pressures lately have served to intensify consumerist attitudes among students, especially in the older, non-traditional age group. Also of major concern to those in attendance was the increasing number of cases felt to involve “mental health issues.” Indeed, several female ombuds present, having encountered “psychologically unstable” visitors, voiced palpable apprehension with regard to their personal “on-the-job security.” It was suggested that advanced education is getting “crazier” by the year.

Meeting the academic ombuds community in person was both informing, and affirming. But, just as I was beginning to feel more like a “real” ombudsperson, my third and final term expired. No one had served more than one term as the student society ombudsperson at the university before, let alone three. However, dynamics peculiar to student government suggested that it was perhaps time to move on, and I chose not to re-apply.

Early on in my ADED program I had thought to write generally on the ‘non-traditional age’
university experience, and had acquired departmental support in that regard. However, experience gleaned as a complaint handler prompted me to refine my focus to specifically include mature adult students in the Faculty of Education.

When informed of the new direction, my pro-tem commented: "Are you sure? I liked your first idea better. Why on Earth would anyone be interested in a bunch of whiny student teachers?"
Whiney Student Teachers

The first student teacher encountered during my tenure as complaint handler was a mature “thirty-something” whose practicum had been halted in its late stages for violation of a code of professional ethics governing relations between participants. The student had approached the school’s Principal to complain about aspects of the sponsor teacher’s pedagogy - an action felt to be in violation of a regulation requiring student teachers to first approach their classroom colleague on such matters. Upon being notified by the school’s Principal, the sponsor teacher sought the advice of a teacher colleague, also a union representative, who recommended immediate withdrawal from further participation in the practicum. The Principal concurred, and the practicum was summarily terminated.

But the student was desperate to continue, and visited the Ombuds Office to request that someone phone the sponsor teacher with a view to helping “smooth things over.” A novice ombud at the time, I was unsure whether to get involved, but was nonetheless persuaded. The sponsor teacher was polite, but remained firm with regard to not having the complainant back in the classroom.

“I’m getting close to retirement,” she said. “I really don’t need the hassle.”

Further comment was reserved other than to suggest that the student was “delusional,” and
clearly "not cut-out to be a teacher." The complainant, having arranged an appointment with the Dean, requested that I go along, as a "witness." The Dean was cordial but, citing institutional procedure, directed us to the office of a subordinate several floors below. We waited outside for a few minutes, presumably so that the official could be briefed by telephone. The student in the meantime grew increasingly agitated and, desperately searching for somewhere to sit down, pleaded with me to assist.

"I'm hyperventilating! Can you explain it to them. Please .... ?"

I agreed, perhaps naively. At the time, however, it seemed like a fairly reasonable request. The official greeted us apprehensively, and ushered us into his office. Following introductions, I repeated what I had been told about the situation, being very careful to use words like "alleged" and "if what I have been told is true" to preface each point. I recounted the student's claim to having felt "intimidated" by the veteran sponsor teacher's authoritative bearing, and also the accompanying assertion that initial attempts to communicate discomfort to the teacher "one-on-one" in person had been "arbitrarily dismissed," and "brushed off." I clearly emphasized my understanding that the complainant only wished to be allowed to continue in the practicum and had expressed "no interest whatsoever" in seeking redress, legal or otherwise.

"Can anything be done?" I asked.
The administrator shrugged. "It's a professional matter involving the school and beyond our mandate. We can't force schools to take student teachers. And it's far too late in the practicum to find a new placement. Given the nature of the circumstances, however, we are prepared to offer a supplemental practicum during the next session, at reduced cost."

It sounded like a decent offer to me, but the complainant, contained up to that point, instantly erupted, exclaiming:

"Hold on a minute! You can't fail me just because I complained. I've put far too much time, effort, and money into coming this far only to be informed at this late stage that I'm apparently not 'cut-out' to be a teacher. Besides, I can't afford to wait. I've got employers lined up to hire me. The Principal is biased. So is the Faculty of Education. In fact, the whole damn system is biased."

The official abruptly stood and declared "This meeting is over. Please leave. Immediately."

His attention then turned towards me specifically.

"You call yourself an ombudsperson!?" he said. "Ombudspersons are supposed to be neutral. How dare you come in here and threaten the Faculty of Education with legal action?!"
I was stunned, but fumbling for words, instinctively managed to muster what I felt to be an appropriately dignified response.

“I’m sorry if that’s your impression,” I offered, “but I can assure you it was not my intention.”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” he responded, with withering glare. “I know a threat when I hear one,” he added. “It’s all here in my notes. The appropriate authorities will be notified. You will be hearing about this, believe me. There are better ways to deal with such things.”

“And what might they be?” I countered.

“I don’t know,” was the cheerless response. “I don’t know.”

The student and I retreated to the plaza outside.

“See! That’s what they do. They shut you down and then label you a troublemaker.”

I repaired to my office alone to reflect on what had just transpired. The official’s reaction had been extremely defensive in my view. What exactly had I done to ignite his fury? And what exactly did he say? I’ve spent a lifetime in the music business. I too know a threat when I hear one. Could I be facing discipline, just for asking a few difficult questions? I was nervous, even
fearful. It had taken me a long, long time to get to university, and I wasn't in a hurry to leave.

A few weeks went by, however, during which I heard nothing. The official's reaction appeared to have been tactical. And, believe me, it worked. Indeed, I wasn't particularly eager to re-establish contact with the Faculty of Education any time soon, and subsequent complainants were essentially left to their own devices.

One of those was a student teacher whose "failure to demonstrate learner centred approaches" in the classroom had earned him a failure in his practicum. His interim evaluations consistently referred to an "unfailing need to be the centre of attention." Equally noteworthy was the student's apparent unwillingness to acknowledge and correct this particular flaw. Program administrators offered an opportunity to take a supplementary practicum, but the student balked, adamantly insisting that it was "unnecessary."

"They're wrong. I'm a perfectly good teacher. I'm going to appeal. They'll have to pass me. You'll see."

And, he was equally certain as to who was the villain in the piece. According to him the faculty advisor, a middle aged woman, had entirely misjudged his performance. "Sure I occasionally show off," he said, "but not all the time. And besides, the kids like it."
"I've had this problem before," he continued. "Women find me attractive. I think she (the faculty advisor) is intimidated by my good looks."

Taken somewhat aback by the odd comment, I looked closely for signs of sarcasm or humour, but found none. He was serious. A silent alarm went off.

The student maintained that the sponsor teacher had been friendly and supportive, and "must have been pressured" into concurring with the faculty advisor's negative assessment. He pleaded with me to call the teacher at the school to get the "real story." I agreed but, anxious to avoid a repeat of the previous incident, added a caveat.

"If I phone the sponsor teacher, and she backs up what the the faculty advisor says, would you then be convinced of the need to address your technical shortcomings?"

"Definitely," he replied, "but she'll support me all the way. You'll see. That is, unless the faculty advisor got to her first and forced her to change her story."

I waited until after school to call, and was put through to the sponsor teacher immediately. After I'd introduced myself and explained the purpose of my inquiry, she agreed to discuss the matter.

"I'd be happy to," she offered. "Where would you like to start?"
“How about the ‘show off’ part of the faculty advisor’s assessment.”

“Oh yes,” she said. “He needs to be the centre of attention all the time. It’s all ‘me, me, me . . . look at me.’ Kids on the periphery are being ignored. And, frankly, his command of course content isn’t so great either.”

“So you would concur with the faculty advisor then?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” she said. “I had initially thought that a supplemental practicum would be a good idea, so that he could alter his approach and come on board, but now I’m having second thoughts. One has to recognize that something needs changing before it can be changed. Apparently he’s right, and everybody else is wrong. I hope he comes around, but I don’t know if he can.”

I relayed the information, which was grudgingly accepted.

Complaints from student teachers during my first year as ombud came to represent a substantial proportion of the office’s total caseload. But, was it the number of cases that attracted and held my attention, or their nature, and intensity? Each one invariably involved a mature adult student and some aspect of either the practicum or the appeal process, with virtually none being concerned with course work or exams. And emotions would routinely run high.
Different types of complainant emerged. First there are the disgruntled failures focussed on salvaging their foundering academic careers. These students, typically having done very well in the course work portion of the program, consider their practicum performance to have been equally excellent. Blaming their predicament on “unfair evaluation,” few, if any, seem prepared to accept personal responsibility for their lack of success. The conduct of sponsor teachers, faculty advisors, and administrators is instead cited as the prime cause of their “problem.”

A second type, also representing a considerable proportion, comprises education students who, having successfully negotiated the practicum, instead choose to wait until “clearing the system” before registering dissatisfaction with the process; that is, until after graduating and securing a teaching position. One such complainant stated:

“I waited to complain because I was afraid of being failed, or of receiving a negative employment recommendation from my sponsor teacher and faculty advisor. I feel obliged to register a complaint now so that what I went through doesn’t happen to future students.”

Another incident similarly demonstrated the degree to which confidence in the program’s ability to respond fairly has been undermined. A mature adult student teacher approached the Ombuds Office to register concern about being required to identify himself on an essay length evaluation of the teacher education program. He expressed serious concern that an unflattering review might prompt departmental “retaliation” either in the form of an assigned F, or negative comments.
to prospective employers.

The student was well groomed, and appeared sensible, and articulate - hardly the paranoid type. However, for some reason he wished to register the evaluation with an independent third party prior to submission in order to "establish a time-line in defense should they retaliate."

"I don't know why they bother with these evaluations anyway" he said. "People are afraid to tell the truth."

The apprehension, on surface, seemed unwarranted. Universities have rules to protect students from such miscarriages. However, given my own encounter earlier on, I was not entirely insensitive to his concern. The evaluation, sharply critical of the program, included his name and number. Aspects of the curriculum, and faculty's failure to model pedagogical techniques being taught were each specifically indicted.

"Over there [Education], it's strictly do as I say, not as I do," he said. "They demand that we be self-critical, but refuse to examine themselves in the same light.

"I really don't think you have anything to worry about," I said assuringly. "But, if anything weird happens, be sure to let me know."
The student, as anticipated, submitted the evaluation, passed, and reportedly found work. But “fear of retribution” was becoming a familiar refrain among complainants from the Faculty of Education.

I had been Ombudsperson for one complete academic cycle. A modest raise in salary was proposed and so I re-applied, becoming the first student ombud at the university ever to witness a second year. Complaints from student teachers arrived late that Spring, as if on schedule, and by year’s end we had accumulated eleven, two more than the previous year’s nine, and roughly four times the “campus-wide average.” Again, virtually all were related to appeal processes and practica.

Successive student councils had established increased funding for student services, and a new suite of offices dedicated to that purpose was scheduled to open in four months. Prior to moving the operation, while cleaning out more than a decade’s worth of old files in preparation for shredding or relegation to the the society’s archives, I came across a copy of a letter sent a few years earlier from one of my ombuds predecessors to a senior official in the Faculty of Education. The letter in part stated:

Currently we are writing to you to inform you of an increasing number of inquiries, concerns, and complaints registered with our office that are related to [your] faculty’s appeal process for students who have failed their practicum. Let it be clear that we are not writing in response to one particular complaint, but rather in response to the exceptionally high number of [Education] students contacting our office. The Ombuds Office trusts that you are as concerned as we are (AMS, 2001b).
It was oddly comforting to know that someone else had also noticed that student teachers at "the Big House" seem to complain a lot, and that it hadn't just been my "imagination."

It had been over a year since my first encounter with eduction officials. Attempts to gain access to information which might serve to aid students in mounting their appeals continued to be unproductive. Phone calls and e-mail inquiries, if indeed answered at all, drew perfunctory responses. Policies and procedures seemed to be closely guarded secrets available to insiders only. I imagined how word might have spread around the department that the Ombudsperson was some sort of middle-aged "hot-head," hired by the student association to stir up trouble.

Then I received a call out of the blue from a student who had just been accepted into the teacher education program in another city. "I had to call," she said, "to vent my frustrations in dealing with the Faculty of Education at your university."

"Go on," I replied.

"I was short one or two requirements for acceptance into the program there, and inquired as to what courses I might take in order to gain admission the following year. The woman there was extraordinarily rude, and refused to give me any information. Nobody else would help either. Their behaviour was appalling."
The caller, offering only her first name, concluded by saying “The teacher education program there has a terrible reputation for the way it treats people. I’m so glad I went somewhere else instead. Thanks for listening to me. I just wanted to say something for the record and get it off my chest.”

The Ombudsperson’s modest salary was raised again, and so again I re-applied. A third consecutive term provided a doubly unprecedented opportunity to observe yet another academic cycle. Helping students navigate the system had become fulfilling work, and the student association was definitely getting its money’s worth out of me. I was routinely putting in long hours, well beyond what the position’s modest salary called for. Plus, I seemed to be getting good at it, a fact most clearly demonstrated by the increasing number of cash refunds I was managing to negotiate.

Student teacher complaints arrived on schedule again that year, and numbers immediately began to show a sharp increase over the previous year’s total. Moreover, this time tensions did not subside in June-July as before, instead lasting well into August and September.

There was no apparent reason for the sudden marked increase. Our on-campus profile, as in previous years, remained low and the office was as hard to find as ever. In fact, for four months there was no Ombuds Office, the old one having been demolished prior to construction of the new facility. Service during that period was limited to phone calls and e-mail. Face-to-face, “confidential” meetings had to take place outdoors, or in the Student Union Building’s dingy
basement hallways and stairwells.

Then I got wind of an imminent turnover of personnel in the Faculty of Education. Several high ranking officials, including the Dean, were apparently planning to move on. A professor with whom I was familiar was to assume a key position. She had struck me as being fairly approachable, and I sensed an opportunity to perhaps re-establish relations between the Ombuds Office and the program.

A situation had just come up which I thought might serve as an ice-breaker. It comprised a group of individual complaints about a particular faculty advisor’s personal and professional conduct. During two years as Ombuds, this was my first case involving multiple complainants, and a single, individual respondent.

Two students had come forward initially, each separately alleging that their advisor was a “rude, inconsiderate bully” who routinely “humiliated” student teachers under his supervision. The end of their practicum period was approaching, and final evaluations were underway. Though wary of retaliation, each had “had it up to here” with the advisor’s “attitude” and wished to register their concern with an independent third party prior to approaching the faculty. In addition, I was told that a number of other students might also be stepping forward but, as they were “even more afraid,” they planned to wait until “clearing the system” before doing so. That is, until after receiving certification and finding work as teachers.
The two initial complainants had arranged a meeting with officials and requested that I contact the department in advance to confirm that the Ombuds Office had "become involved." However, over time I'd become a more cautious ombud and, though welcoming a reason to make contact, I resolved to wait for all the other complainants to step forward before involving the Ombuds Office directly. And, eventually they did, each separately approaching the office to condemn the offending conduct. Only then did I feel ready to get in touch.

The official cordially received me in her office. I explained my role as ombud and broached the subject of student teacher complaints in general.

"If student teachers are having problems with the program, why are they telling you, and not us," she asked.

"Good question," I said. "Frankly, many say they fear reprisal."

"What about the Education Students Association? Doesn't the ESA have people to take care of these things?"

"Yes, but they're students as well, busy with their own affairs and almost impossible to find. In fact, I've been trying to reach them on and off for years. Besides, I am told that ESA ombuds themselves being subject to evaluation, have in the past felt pressured to conform with faculty
directives."

"What exactly do you mean exactly by a ‘high’ incidence of complaints?" she asked.

"Well, complaints from student teachers each year seem to represent a substantial proportion of the Office’s annual total, consistently much higher than any other academic unit."

"The practicum is a naturally more dynamic learning environment. A higher number of complaints is to be expected."

"That’s true," I conceded, “but Medicine, Nursing, and Social Work, units which also feature internships and practica, don’t generate any where near such numbers. And ombuds colleagues across Canada tell me that they haven’t experienced anything remotely similar involving student teachers at their institutions."

"That’s interesting," she said, “but numbers can be misleading. I’d be careful."

I brought up the most recent case, the one involving multiple complainants. “Yes,” the official-confirmed, “I’ve heard from two students concerning the conduct of a particular advisor."

"Well, actually there’s more than that."
"How many more?"

"Four more just checked-in, making it an even half-dozen."

"Why didn't they step forward earlier," she asked.

"Apparently they were even more afraid of reprisal than the others, and wanted to wait until clearing the system."

"Well," the official offered. "This could be serious. Or, it could be nothing. But that many complaints about a single person is difficult to ignore. We'll look into it and, if if their concerns are substantiated, the advisor in question is likely to be offered counselling or 'sensitivity training.' If the offer is spurned, or if the program doesn't 'take,' the person's continuing employment might well be open to reconsideration."

"Fair enough," I said.

We discussed student teacher failure in general. "Nobody should be surprised that they have failed," she said. "We rely on the paper trail. That is, every F is to be accompanied by a substantial written record testifying to a student's shortcomings."
I mentioned that virtually all student teacher complainants to the Ombuds Office appear to be mature adults.

“That follows,” she said. “It’s not uncommon for adults to seek teacher certification after being out of school and in the work force for a number of years.”

I mentioned that most complainants maintain that they’d done extremely well in the course component of the program and were surprised by problems encountered in the practicum.

“Yes, our research confirms that as well.”

“What do you think makes them particularly prone to experiencing difficulty?” I asked.

“Well, it’s usually whatever caused them to have difficulty in the work they did prior to deciding to become teachers.”

“So, older students tend to come to teaching on the rebound, and with baggage?”

“It would seem so.”

I asked if anyone had noticed a tendency for disgruntled failures to deny responsibility for their
lack of success, and to place the onus on conflict with sponsor teachers and faculty advisors.

She grinned knowingly. "Oh, you mean the 'God's gift to teaching' syndrome. Yes, some people are convinced that they've been 'chosen' as teachers, and that they know best. They refuse to accept criticism of any kind."

In parting I offered that "this visit has been far more pleasant than my initial encounter with the program."

"Like other units over the past decade, we've been asked to do more, with less," she said. "It's taken a toll on administrators everywhere."

"Thanks for your time," I said. "I hope everything works out. And by the way, if I decide to write further on this topic, can I contact the department for additional information?"

"Certainly," she said, "feel free."

An e-mail was waiting for me back at the office from yet another student teacher. We arranged to meet. It was an odd situation. Apparently, after having been certified to teach at the elementary level, and having taught successfully for a period of time in the public school system as a teacher-on-call, this teacher had decided to undertake a second practicum, at the secondary level,
in order to further enhance opportunities of gaining secure, long-term employment.

Nonetheless, despite having passed the elementary practicum a few years earlier, and having earned letters of glowing recommendation from principals at elementary schools where she had subsequently gone on to teach, she somehow managed to fail the secondary practicum.

The student was naturally upset. "It was like failing my driver's test after having driven for years."

Recalling the official's "God's gift to teaching" comment, I asked the student bluntly: "Is there anything 'personal' you can think of that might have come between you and the sponsor teacher?"

"Well," she replied, "we did have a 'history.' We were classmates during our elementary practica. And yes, I suppose I could have been more deferential. But like her, I'm already a certified teacher and well familiar with classroom procedures. She [the sponsor teacher] said I was being arrogant and pushy. I was only offering to help with the work load, to make her job easier. She didn't need to be so sensitive."

The student had appealed the failure on the grounds that she was never warned that she had been in danger of failing. I checked program's handbook. It did seem to indicate that program officials
are encouraged to inform student teachers at the practicum’s mid-point with regard to technical and other shortcomings, conceivably so that they can make improvements and avoid unexpected failure.

This student, whose progress by all reports at mid-point appeared satisfactory, had allegedly received no such warning, a contention bolstered by documents shown to me at the time. With minor exceptions, periodic interim evaluations were all positive. Everything indicated that the practicum had been progressing more than satisfactorily, then abruptly terminated just prior to completion. Something unexpected must have happened to upset things at the last minute. The student’s request on appeal that the failure (F) be overturned and replaced with a pass (P) was, however, denied.

But program officials, in denying the appeal, acknowledged in writing that an “irregularity” had indeed occurred with regard to evaluative “process.” However, the carefully worded text emphatically stated that the “acknowledgement” was not to be considered an “admission” of incompetence or bias on behalf of the faculty or its representatives. Regardless, the student was offered a supplemental practicum in the next session - “at no cost.”

But the offer was spurned, the student having successfully secured continuing employment at a public secondary school without receiving additional certification to teach at that level. Worried that an F on her permanent academic record might hinder further career advancement, she then
sought assistance from the Ombuds Office in mounting a second appeal in order to secure a “back-dated withdrawal” - an occasionally employed procedure whereby an F on ones official transcript is retroactively superceded by a far less stigmatic W.

The back-dated withdrawal is a device used by universities to “fix” anomolous, awkward, academic situations. Indeed, a former university Registrar once facetiously referred to the practice as “rewriting history.” It is sometimes, however, entirely the right response. Nobody wins, and nobody loses. Students aren’t rewarded with grades they haven’t earned, and academic integrity is essentially maintained.

The student, insisting that the sponsor teacher’s negative evaluation had been “vindictive,” maintained that her secondary practicum had been an “unfair debacle,” and that all record of it should be “expunged.” In her view, the program was simply “covering up” for the sponsor teacher’s actions. Moreover, it was also felt that the program’s offer of a supplementary practicum at no cost, though couched in legalese to preclude the likelihood of a lawsuit, essentially served to acknowledge responsibility. The student’s second appeal, however, was similarly unsuccessful.

Professional certification affords entry into various “communities of practice,” like dentistry, medicine, journalism, engineering, architecture, and teaching, etc. More than just a degree, certification is an opportunity to become “one of them.” In addition to the rote accumulation of facts,
the passing of exams, and the presumption of technical proficiency, it’s about acquiring an understanding of, and appreciation for customs, procedures, language, and other norms of community and professional conduct.

Education officials assert that students are not just being taught how to teach, but how to be teachers. Similarly, the Faculty of Medicine teaches students how to be or how to act like doctors. The same goes for lawyers, engineers, and others, including bus drivers, streetsweepers, garbage collectors, or musicians.

Positive, constructive interaction with associates is integral to success in most collective undertakings. To get along, one must indeed go along. This is especially the case in careers which involve governing bodies such as the College of Physicians and Surgeons, the Bar Association, or the College of Teachers.

I recall a case involving a student in a different professional program with particularly competitive entrance requirements. Though having gained acceptance to the elite program, the student complainant somehow managed to experience immediate and profound difficulty. The school maintained that his work was grievously deficient, that he refused to acknowledge monumental technical shortcomings and, moreover, that he was unreasonable, argumentative, and a general disruption to the program. Asked to withdraw voluntarily only three months into a two year program, the student adamantly refused, insisting that his work was being unfairly evaluated, and
was in fact excellent.

“I’ve always done well in school,” he said. “This can’t be happening.”

The school then asked the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FOGS) to approve the student’s immediate expulsion. The student countered with, “If I’m so bad, how was I admitted to the program in the first place? And, besides, halfway through the first term in a two year program is too early to tell?”

FOGS sided with the student. The rules were on his side. Published guidelines confirmed that the school’s reaction was premature. In fact, technically, he hadn’t even actually failed a course, but was merely doing extremely poorly across the board. FOGS agreed that it was too early to pull the plug, and immediate expulsion was temporarily precluded. However, the school, citing concern for its reputation in the professional community, then withdrew sponsorship of the student’s summer internship.

We met in the Ombuds Office. He was extremely agitated. Fidgeting and pacing back and forth between alternating outbursts of melancholy and blind rage, he decried his instructors’ “obviously biased” evaluations, and condemned efforts to “get rid” of him. Examples of his work, however, appeared to support the school’s misgivings. Even I, a layman, an outsider to the profession, could tell. Grammar, syntax, logic, even spelling - each was woefully deficient.
At the student's insistence I phoned the school's Director, who consented to meet.

"Who are you and what is your function?" she inquired curtly.

I described an ombudsperson's role as "designated neutral," and confirmed that she was under no obligation to speak with me.

"So, you’re employed by the student society, and not the university. You’re not a lawyer, are you?"

"No, actually I’m a musician."

"Okay," she said, "let’s talk."

I got right to the point. "Your program is known to have highly competitive entrance requirements. How would it be possible for a student to have gained admission, and then immediately prove to be so profoundly unsuited?"

"Simple," she said. "He’s a nutcase."

"Excuse me, Madame," I offered in mock horror, "but we don’t like to use the ‘n-word’ around
She smiled, and continued. "We thought we had a good system here, but it appears that accidents can, and will happen. It’s been a terribly frustrating disruption for everybody, including other students in the program. Even his classmates are complaining. The work is abominable, and he is unwilling to accept any criticism whatsoever. And I can’t recommend him for an internship - it would thoroughly undermine our reputation in the professional community. We are thoroughly at a loss, and don’t know what else to do at this time but urge him to leave voluntarily. Can you help us negotiate an end to this troublesome affair?"

"I’m not sure," I said. "Are we talking about a backdated withdrawal to before the deadline for receiving a W, which would qualify the student for a complete refund - just as if the whole affair never happened."

The director nodded glumly. "The university doesn’t generally encourage such compromise, especially when money is involved, but something has to be done, and fast."

I contacted the student to offer my take on the situation. "This is an all-star faculty," I said. "Several are undisputed leaders in the field, with years of experience, both in practice and in teaching. If you continue to maintain that your difficulties stem from a conspiracy against you and not as a result of any technical or personal shortcomings on your part, you run the risk of"
being labelled a paranoid wing-nut. You would also be doomed to fail the program’s core courses, and badly, and thus be ineligible for term two’s courses, those for which the core courses are pre-requisites. And, as you would then consequently be ineligible for the summer internship, your academic progress would automatically grind to a halt, FOGS would eventually be obliged to withdraw the support hereunto provided, and you’d likely find yourself expelled with a series of F’s on your permanent record. With a proven record of failure, your ability to gain entry into a different post-graduate program, either here, or at another university, would be severely hindered.”

“On the other hand,” I ventured, “the school seems prepared to admit making a mistake with regard to your admission and, if you agree to withdraw now, they will return all fees paid to date and pretend it never happened. You might not even receive a W for withdrawing. You could then perhaps take some time off, consider alternative plans, and maybe make a fresh start in another field to which you are better suited. It’s your call.”

“Screw them!” screamed the student. “I’ve dreamt of becoming a [. . . ] all my life. They can’t do this to me. They’re violating my human rights. I’m calling a lawyer.”

The offer was initially spurned, but the situation grew increasingly acrimonious and he was eventually obliged to accept. The Director later called the office to express gratitude for the “helpful assistance,” and the student sent along a postcard expressing similar sentiments.
The office continued to field anonymous complaints from student teachers. One among several involved a music teacher in the public school system. Calling from a cell-phone in the playground at recess, he wanted to vent frustration at several years earlier having been assigned to a practicum at a school without a music program.

"It happened a few years back, but it's been eating away at me. They said they didn't have enough music teachers to go around. I had to teach core courses instead. I wasn't up on the content. My sponsor teacher got impatient with me, but it wasn't her fault. I was unprepared, did poorly, and failed. Then I had to push extra hard to get a second practicum. I'm teaching now, but the experience was costly. The financial fallout from taking extra time to complete contributed to the failure of my first marriage. If I could sue for emotional distress and lost income, I would. The program is a joke. The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. And they don't appreciate the human cost of their incompetence. They're far more interested in covering their asses."

"Thanks for calling," I said.

"Thanks for letting me get it off my chest."

"Would you like to leave your name?"
“It doesn’t matter.”

“What would you like me to do?”

“Never mind. Forget it”

Another former student’s call illustrated a common theme.

“It’s been a while now, but I just had to phone. My sponsor teacher treated me like a slave. I did absolutely everything, unsupervised, with no instruction or encouragement whatsoever while she worked away in another room on her master’s thesis. Sure, she’d stick her nose in now and then, and would be highly critical, but mostly I was on my own.”

“Why didn’t you talk about it with your faculty advisor at the time,” I asked.

"I tried to, but it wasn’t well received. The faculty advisor was a mentor to the sponsor teacher and highly supportive of her post-graduate aspirations. I thought it best to let it go. Friends and colleagues tell me their practicum went well, but mine was sheer hell, and that’s not fair. It should be the same for everybody.”

“And what can I do for you at this late date,” I inquired.
"Nothing. I just had to tell somebody about it so it doesn’t happen to others in the future. I called Education but they just put me on hold. Please, let them know how I feel. Thanks for your time. Sorry to have bothered you."

It was April, a month from the end of my third and final term as ombuds. The new practicum season was just getting underway, and student teacher complaints again began to arrive on schedule. They had become like the proverbial “swallows returning to Capistrano.” A predictable annual event. Two particular cases come to mind.

The first was a “thirty something” with a prior Ombuds Office history. Indeed, she had sought the office’s assistance on more than one previous occasion. In this instance, the practicum had been terminated in its very early stages. As with many such cases, it was for “unprofessional conduct.” This behaviour, again not atypically, was said to comprise chronic tardiness and a general failure to follow instructions accompanied by a tendency to have an excuse for everything. The situation had culminated in the student verbally confronting the sponsor teacher in the teachers’ lounge in the presence of school officials. She had alleged, and apparently rather loudly, that the sponsor teacher had been “lying” and was “out to get” her. The veteran sponsor teacher consequently no longer wanted the student teacher “anywhere near my students.”

“I have to be honest with you,” I told the student, who was a half hour late for our scheduled
meeting. "It doesn't look good. Like it or lump it, the classroom belongs to the sponsor teacher. What he says goes. It's that simple. Didn't they tell you?"

"But it's not true. Everything he said is a lie."

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"You weren't ever late?"

"Well, maybe a few times."

"And you didn't argue with him?"

"Well, yes, but he told me the wrong time, and then he sent me on an errand, but the door was locked, so I had to go to the custodian's office to get a key, but he wasn't there, so I had to wait around for him. And then it was lunchtime. It wasn't my fault."

"Might I point out that you were a half hour late for this meeting," I said, curious as to what further excuses might be forthcoming.
"Yes, but my alarm clock didn’t work, and the busses weren’t running on time, plus I had a meeting with someone else, and it was raining. But I didn’t bring my umbrella, and I had my new suede outfit on, so I had to wait until it stopped raining. It wasn’t my fault."

“What about the ‘she doesn’t follow instructions’ part?”

“Well, I tried to give him what he wanted. But I know those young students better than he does. He’s old and out of touch with what’s going on. The kids like my approach better. I’m a great teacher. He’s a liar.”

“You mentioned a confrontation, in the teachers’ lounge, in front of colleagues. Have you burnt all your bridges, or do you think an apology might get you back in the classroom?”

“I’m not apologizing. He lied. I may have behaved badly, but I was provoked. They can’t just throw me out. I’m going to get a lawyer and sue for reinstatement, and for libel.”

“I don’t think you appreciate the delicate political relationship between all the players in the whole teacher education affair,” I explained. “The university, the school’s administration, the teachers’ union, the school board, parents, and society at large - each has a stake in what goes on, and it’s a volatile mix.”
According to the rules of engagement, the program can't force a sponsor teacher to take a student teacher in the first place, let alone force them to take them back. And, given the confrontational nature of your relationship, you can perhaps appreciate their reluctance to place you in another situation. Regulations clearly state that they're under no obligation to give you a second chance. And my experience with the Faculty of Education over the past several years suggests that successful appeal is highly unlikely, if not altogether impossible."

"Wow!" she said. "That's harsh. Are you sure?"

I was, at least reasonably so. But, in order to be absolutely certain, I suggested we get a second "unbiased" opinion. After months of concerted effort involving countless phone and e-mail messages, I had finally managed to establish contact with someone on the Education Students Association ombuds team.

"Have you had any cases so far this year?" I inquired.

"No," he said. "I've been too busy working."

"Well you've got one now," I said. "Can you help out?"

"Sure. No problem."
A meeting was arranged between the ombud and the student. I heard back a few days later.

"We had lunch and talked it through," he said. "I think she gets it."

The student later also called to confirm her understanding of the situation. "I talked with the ESA ombud," she said, "It looks like it's over. And my lawyer agrees. I don't like it, but thanks for being straight with me."

The other case referred to above involved a student who had failed her practicum, oddly enough not because of a bad attitude or poor professional conduct, but because of a well documented, specific technical deficiency. The student had been advised by program officials to forego an appeal in return for assurance that a supplemental practicum would "likely" be offered. But the student, having heard rumours that "program officials can't be trusted," chose to contact the Ombuds Office first before agreeing.

I acknowledged the program's less than stellar reputation in certain areas and asked, "With whom did you speak over there?"

"Somebody new, I think," she said.

"I haven't met them. What are they like?"
“Nice enough, I suppose, but I’ve heard all these horror stories about student teachers getting screwed. Could you please give them a call and find out what the deal is?”

I inquired with my newly acquired ombuddy. “Who are these new people, and what are they like?”

“They’re alright, I guess,” he said. “At least they haven’t been completely colonized by the system yet. You should give them a call.”

I phoned over, and someone picked up on the second ring.

“Hello,” I said, “this is the student society Ombudsperson. I understand that you have advised one of your failed students not to appeal because a second practicum is ‘likely’ to be offered. Can we talk about this over lunch?”

“Sounds great,” she said.

We met at my favourite on-campus bistro. “Just so you know,” I offered, “I am developing an interest in student teachers and practicum related dynamics. You don’t mind if I take notes while we’re chatting do you?”
"Not at all," she said.

"Thanks," I replied. "Let's get down to it then. How likely is this student to be offered another practicum?"

"Well, I suppose it's 70:30 in favour. No, more like 80:20. However, the way it works is, if she appeals the F it would 'officially' confirm that she doesn't accept that her performance is deficient, and that itself would reflect poorly on her perceived ability to self-reflect. If students aren't sufficiently self-critical and can't acknowledge their deficiencies, then they can't improve. And, if they don't improve, they can't pass. It's kind of a Catch-22 situation."

"Let see if I have this straight," I said. "If a student appeals an F, it means they can't accept criticism, which is itself grounds for failure. Like with quicksand, struggling just makes things worse."

"I guess so. Yes."

"So, if this student just 'goes along,' acknowledges her technical deficiencies, and doesn't appeal, things are 'likely' to work out."

"Yes. She needs to work on her planning. However, I think the problem is highly fixable."
"Then I will encourage her to accept your advice."

I described the incidence of complaints from student teachers over the past several years adding, "this year we’re on track for a three-fold increase."

"Wow!" she said. "I had no idea."

I sensed a chance to perhaps probe further. "Of all the possible reasons you can think of why student teachers here would complain, what would be number one?"

"Well, the practicum is naturally a more conflicted learning environment."

"I understand, but my ombuds colleagues at other universities across the country tell me that their student teachers don’t seem to complain nearly as much. Is there anything else you can think of?"

"Perhaps it’s because they [student teachers on practica] don’t get paid. Some have told me that, as they are providing professional assistance to teachers, they are doing real work, and should be compensated."

"Right," I said, "that would certainly legitimize their peripheral participation. But it’s
essentially the same deal everywhere, isn't it.”

“Yes, but some jurisdictions, especially in the United States, are experimenting with alternative methods involving less coursework and theory, and lengthy internships starting out at lower, introductory rates of pay.”

“I'm sure the union here would enjoy that,” I ventured.

“No kidding,” she replied.

Our lunch concluded. It had been a pleasant and productive meeting. Later that week I received an unsolicited e-mail from a different program official suggesting that we also “meet to exchange ideas.” I could barely contain myself. Relations had evolved considerably.

We met at the same restaurant. “It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” I offered.

“Likewise,” said she. “I understand that you and my colleague had a productive meeting. I'd like you to know that we are working on improvements to our appeal procedures. New instruments have been designed to enhance access and maximize transparency which, hopefully, might eliminate students' perceptions of bias.”
Again, I mentioned my "academic interest" in complaints from mature student teachers, and asked if she could provide any insight as to possible causes for the perennially high incidence of complaints.

"The practicum is naturally a more conflicted learning environment," she said.

"True enough," I conceded. "But does anything else come to mind?"

"Well, ours is one of the largest teacher education programs in the country. Perhaps it has something to do with size."

"What about admission requirements?" I asked. "Do you think that too many poorly suited applicants might be slipping through the process?"

"It could be part of the problem," she said. "Some schools rely on personal interviews. Others feel that written applications are sufficient. However, with the huge number of students we have, it would be difficult to interview all of them, so we tend to rely on their transcripts and GPA. Our academic requirements are among the highest in the country. I believe that, because the bar is set quite high at the outset, successful applicants come here under the false impression that, having been granted admission, they’ve already ‘made it’ - you know, pre-selected for success. So, when they experience difficulty in the practicum, especially after doing well on the course
portion, failure is completely unexpected. They find it hard to comprehend that they’re the ones responsible. So, they blame others.”

“Interesting,” I offered. “What about the assertion that your program takes a ‘crucible’ approach to teacher education. You know, that it’s excessively hard?”

“Well, we have an offering which is shorter and more condensed than most. Consequently it’s also more intense. But, frankly, I don’t think teacher education is hard enough.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I think student teachers should undergo lengthy internships.”

“Unpaid?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps. Funding for education is tight.”

“Wouldn’t long, unpaid internships scare a lot of prospective teachers away, especially older ones?” I asked.

“Teaching isn’t like other jobs,” she said, with discernable conviction. “It requires a special kind
of person. Too many people come into it for the money and the job security. Teaching is an art. It's more about self-sacrifice and dedication. Plus we have to be very careful about protecting the interests of the children.”

“Yes,” I said, nodding knowingly, “believe me, I understand. My wife and I have had three children go through the K-12 system. But, nevertheless, many unsuccessful interns feel that in loco parentis is often too quickly invoked, or too ‘convenient’ an excuse for terminating a practicum, especially when it’s clearly a situation involving ‘bad chemistry’ between the student and the sponsor teacher.”

“Yes, I suppose that could happen. But it’s okay for us to be tough, as long as we’re fair. And we must be seen to be fair.”

“If you were to identify the primary locus of practicum unrest,” I asked, “where would you point the finger?”

“Sponsor teachers,” was the unhesitating response. “Without question.”

“Really?” I replied. “Why so?”

“They’re the weakest link. Sure, they may know how to teach children, but working with adults
is entirely another story. Training is inconsistent at best, and sometimes one has to question both their ability, and their commitment. They don’t get paid anything extra you know, only tuition credit.”

“It can’t be their fault only,” I offered. “Surely the responsibility must be shared. How about faculty advisors.”

“Well, faculty are often seconded from the school system for extended periods of time. People can be ‘out of the loop’ for too long. There should perhaps be a limit to the amount of time an instructor or an advisor is allowed to remain on faculty and away from teaching.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“In order to close the ‘gap’ between theory and practice. Classroom dynamics can change over time. Faculty need to ‘get back in the pool’ every few years and refresh their teaching experiences.”

“Where do all these faculty advisors come from anyway,” I asked. “Who are they, what are their qualifications, and who decides who gets hired?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Some are retired teachers, and quite a few are PHD students. But you’d
have to talk to someone else about that.”

I asked about recent publicity surrounding legal action being taken by the program to thwart outside interference in the development of new curriculum.

“It’s all about autonomy,” she said. “We can’t allow others to tell us how and what to teach. And our colleagues in programs elsewhere agree with us” (a reference to another university’s request for intervenor status in the proceedings).

“So I’ve heard, but I understand that the crux of the matter involves a proposal to expand the ratio between the number of faculty advisors and student teachers under their supervision. Don’t you think that opportunities for practicum related conflict, already ‘excessively high’ by the Ombuds Office’s estimation, might increase even further if supervision is spread more thinly?”

“Perhaps,” she offered, “but it’s mainly about autonomy.”

“So why is the ratio being expanded?” I pressed. “Is it a funding problem? Surely officials wouldn’t make such a proposal, let alone defend it, if they didn’t have to?”

“You’d have to ask someone else about that,” she said, again neatly side-stepping the issue. “I’m not privy to those discussions.”
Lunch was winding down. "If you don't mind," she inquired cautiously while attempting to get the waiter's attention for the bill, "there is one particular case currently under appeal that looks like it might end up going to court. Is there anything you can say which might help me get an idea of what's going on? Do you know the one I'm talking about?"

"Yes, perhaps I do. But there's little I can say about it, given confidentiality constraints. However, presuming of course that we're thinking about the same situation, in my view the whole thing was thoroughly avoidable."

"How do you mean?" she inquired.

"Let's just say that, of all the complaints I've handled involving education students over the last several years, this could be the most distressing. And I'll tell you why. Frankly, besides those with legitimate complaints, many of the people who contact ombuds offices on campus have emotional or mental health issues, and have brought problems upon themselves. Student teachers are no different.

And of course, while some complainants are victims of injustice, others are just plain unlucky. This person was perhaps one of those. It started off with a simple grievance which was only much later demonstrated to have been well founded. In the interim, however, the student was 'tagged' as a troublemaker and, feeling unfairly marked for failure by officials, naturally began to
‘act out’ accordingly. The institutional response was typically defensive. Frustration grew upon frustration, attitudes on both sides hardened, the learning environment became poisoned, and the unfortunate outcome - the student’s ultimate failure, in my view became a *fait accompli*.

But most upsetting was the situation’s effect. The complainant was completely and utterly ‘devastated’ by the experience. Their self-confidence and esteem each took a major hit, and professional counselling was required to cope with the anguish. People who attend university do so with the reasonable expectation that they will not suffer as a result. Education processes shouldn’t presume a tolerable amount of “collateral damage.” Faculties of Education have a fiduciary responsibility to “do no harm.” The complainant here is owed a measure of redemption, and the pursuit of legal redress in this instance is both rational, and highly therapeutic. But that’s just my opinion, I could be wrong.”

“Thanks for your perspective,” she said, picking up the tab. “I’ll pass it along. And I trust that we can look forward to improved relations between with your office in the future.”

“Amen,” I replied, covering the tip. “It’s too bad that my final term is over next week. But I’ll be briefing my successor on our talk, and you can read my thesis on the topic, when it’s completed. Hopefully the number of complaints from education students will drop as new procedures go into effect.”
"That would be great," she said. "I'm looking forward to it."

I left the meeting more convinced than ever that writing about student teachers was a good idea. But I felt I needed to temper my analysis with some positive input. The Ombuds Office is the "complaint department" after all. Students don't go there to say nice things. Complainants essentially are a 'self-selected' group, and hardly represent a random sample. Surely the majority of student teachers in the program have constructive experiences.

I approached an acquaintance, a "bouncer" at a local nightclub where I am often known to perform as a musician. Ejecting unruly patrons is for him, however, only a part-time job. Having received certification from the program several years ago, he is also a math/science "teacher-on-call" in the public school system.

Now, this guy is not your average looking teacher. A large, heavy-set, muscular fellow with shaved head, tattoos, and conspicuous body piercings, he rides a 'hog,' and is given to wearing chains and black leather. He is, in short, a thoroughly menacing figure.

"Getting much work," I asked.

"Oh yeah, it's coming along. Mostly English and Social Studies, inner-city stuff. I'll be full-time pretty soon, but I'll keep this gig on weekends though, just so I can pay off my student loan"
"Do they hassle you about your appearance?" I asked.

"Nah," he offered, pausing momentarily to intervene in an altercation, "I tone it down a bit. Long-sleeved shirts to cover up the tattoos. And the nose ring stays at home. But, you know me, I get along with everybody."

"I'm writing something about student teachers," I said. "You were certified at the university, weren't you. How did your practicum go?"

"Fine," he said, excusing himself once again to separate a pair of inebriated combatants. "No problem. Pretty much uneventful, and thankfully so, from what I've heard."

My third term ended on schedule, but this time I decided not to re-apply. But, I immediately began to miss the regular paycheque, and resolved once again to pursue music related employment more vigorously. An opportunity was quickly presented at an engagement honouring a visiting foreign dignitary and attended by a coterie of politicians, representatives from the business community, international sports personalities, and persons associated with the university, including the President, a few VPs, a Dean or two, and various assorted faculty.
Between sets of music I gravitated towards the company of some professors with whom I was casually acquainted. The atmosphere was expansive, highly 'convivial,' and the conversation centred around people's current scholarly pursuits.

"And what sort of trouble is our guitar player friend getting into out at the university?" someone asked.

I mentioned my thesis.

"Whiney Student Teachers you say? How delightfully impertinent."

"Thanks," I replied. "I got the title from one of my professors."

"And from a complaint handler's point of view?" contributed a colleague. "Very interesting."

"Why not contact the Dean of Education?" suggested another. "I'm sure he'd be very interested in your observations."

"Do you really think so?" I inquired, cautiously. "He must be a busy guy. What's he like?"

"We know him quite well," they replied, in chorus adding, "You should give him a call. He's a
fine fellow, and very approachable."

I phoned his office.

“Hello,” I said. “My name is Lindsay Mitchell. I’m a graduate student in Adult Education. May I make an appointment to see the Dean, please?”

“And what is this concerning, Mr. Mitchell?”

“I’m trying to learn something about the nature of practicum related dynamics, and was wondering if the Dean might be interested in fielding a few questions.”

“Questions about what?”

“Well, until very recently I was the student society ombudsperson here at the university charged with handling complaints. And, during my tenure I dealt with numerous cases involving student teachers. I’m wondering if the Dean could provide some insight from a senior administrator’s perspective.”

“I’m sorry, the Dean doesn’t deal with complaints. You’ll have to speak with someone else.”
"But I don't have a complaint. I only want to ask the Dean a few questions about complaints from student teachers."

"Sorry. All complaints must be directed to the person in charge of complaints."

"But I don't have a complaint," I pleaded, not unamused by the bureaucratic boondoggle unfolding before me. Indeed, the conversation was beginning to sound like a Monty Python skit.

"Yes, I understand. And thank you. But, I was told that the Dean might also be interested. Could you perhaps double-check his schedule and call me back. All I need is twenty or thirty minutes, and anytime over the next several months would be OK. There's no particular rush. I'm entirely flexible."

"He's booked solid. And besides, he doesn't handle complaints."

"But, I'm trying to tell you. I don't have a complaint?"

"Sorry. You'll have to complain to someone else. Excuse me, I have another call. Let me put you on hold."

"Hello? Is anybody there? Hello?"
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