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Back to School

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Back to School

A FURMAN EDUCATION PROFESSOR RETURNS TO HIGH SCHOOL TO TEACH — AND LIVES TO TELL THE TALE.

When was the last time you were in a classroom?

I remember sitting in my college education classes, looking at the professors and thinking that very thought. Somehow it was easier to ignore the professors' lessons if they could be discredited in this fashion.

Time passed quickly, though, and before I realized it, I was the professor — and 10 years had passed since I had taught a high school class. Many things had changed in that time: standards, curriculum, use of technology, performance assessment, class schedules, inclusion of students with disabilities, and measurements of teacher accountability were all dramatically different.

I address all of these issues in my education classes at Furman, where my specialty is the sciences, and I have observed many high school teachers over the last 10 years. But I had not actually taught high school students under the same expectations and standards that today's future teachers will be asked to meet.

Furman emphasizes engaged learning, in which we involve our students in hands-on tasks and activities to complement their academic work. I began to feel the need to engage myself and to return to a high school classroom. To teach Furman students authentically, I needed to know what life is like in today's high schools.

The Department of Education at Furman is a member of the BellSouth Re-Creating Teacher Education Network. One of the department's activities associated with the network is the Forum for Educational Inquiry, which consists of several partner schools — including Travelers Rest High School.

At a Forum meeting, I was introduced to Harvey Choplin, the principal at Travelers Rest. After several talks with him, I floated the idea of teaching an astronomy course at the school. Choplin warmly welcomed the idea.

Travelers Rest and Furman have often partnered in the past. For example, biology professor Laura Thompson frequently works with Advanced Placement biology students at the school. With the approval of Choplin and my department chair, Lesley Quast, I arranged to teach an astronomy course at the school in the fall of 1999.

The course turned out to be a popular elective. Instead of one class of 24 students, as we anticipated, we had two sections of 27 students. Ann Blackwell, a biology teacher at Travelers Rest, taught the second section.

The classes, which consisted mainly of sophomores and seniors, featured a real cross-section of the student body. They included exchange students from Russia and Great Britain, college-bound students, vocational students, members of Future Farmers of America, special needs students with individual education plans, self-proclaimed "Army brats," and

a few who were more interested in computer games than school.

As school began, I was surprised that I did not feel like a first-year teacher. Most beginning teachers are nervous; I certainly was the first time I stepped into a classroom. And at the top of the worry list is classroom management. While I thought about this issue last fall, it did not dominate my thinking. Perhaps experience, age and having two kids of my own improved my confidence level.

Instead of trying to micromanage student behavior, I decided to keep the rules to a minimum and respond to situations without threats and punishments. An example: during a conversation with the teacher who followed me in the classroom, he asked if I turned the water off at the lab stations during class. I said I did. Apparently, though, some of my students would turn the faucets open all the way, so that when he turned on the water during the next period, it would spray everywhere.

The next day, to test my students, I turned the water off before class as usual — then turned it back on halfway through the period. Chris, standing nearby, jumped about two feet when the sink next to him sprayed water. The look on his face told the story — "busted." Nothing more needed to be said, and the water issue was resolved.

Travelers Rest was the first high school in Greenville County to implement block scheduling, in which class periods are 90 minutes long. The longer periods

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were excellent for lab work and for supplementing lectures with demonstrations, videos and readings. Daily activities usually involved some combination of hands-on work and lecture, and the students completed several research projects, such as designing a lunar colony. As often as possible, we would try to observe the sky during the day. The students followed spots on the sun, traced its path across the sky and calculated its diameter.

Technology has come a long way in 10 years, and I was able to use PowerPoint programs to complement my lectures. The PowerPoint software even allowed me to incorporate NASA images, some only a few days old, into my talks. The students also used PowerPoint for their presentations.

We accessed the Internet to conduct research, but using computers in the classroom was not as easy as I had hoped. The district's Internet connection was at times unreliable, and the competition with the library for computer time could be intense. But by the end of the semester we had worked out most of the bumps.

On several occasions the students visited the observatory at Furman for night observations. My most memorable experience came as I watched them track a setting crescent moon. They were amazed that they could actually see the moon move with references to the trees in the foreground.

Their reaction surprised me, especially because we had already studied the moon's motion and phases over the preceding week. Apparently the classroom work did not convince or impress the students as much as watching the moon actually move across the sky. It reminded me of the importance of genuine experience. I could teach all day about the phases of the moon and its motion, but if they had never stopped to look at the moon before, all my talk and activities were meaningless.

While my classroom experience was different than it had been 10 years ago, my biggest adjustment was to the school's day-to-day operations. All students and faculty at Travelers Rest wear identification badges. The large red "You will be towed" sign on my windshield reminded me to get a parking sticker. I needed to watch how many copies I made because of budget constraints. There seemed to be



CHARLIE REGISTER

Michael Svec, whose specialty is the teaching of science, explains the inner workings of a celestial sphere to Travelers Rest High School students Mary Heuser and Ian Ramsey. The sphere is used to demonstrate the relationship of locations on Earth to objects in the sky.

more fire drills, bus evacuation drills, student assemblies and other interruptions than I remembered.

One of the most valuable aspects of the experience was working with Ann Blackwell. Each morning before class we would compare notes, discuss strategies and offer each other support. She was my connection to the school, reminding me of fire drills, showing me how to complete the grade reports and providing insight into the students. By comparing student performances on tests and projects, we were able to adjust our teaching to better meet the students' needs.

Too often teachers are isolated from each other, and it became even clearer to me that it is critical, especially for new teachers, to have a partner and mentor. Even our more social discussions about what sports our children were playing helped create a closer connection to each other and to the school.

There's an inspirational poster that says, "A ship in the harbor is safe . . . but that's not what ships were made for." My chosen career is to help develop future teachers who can prepare our children to reach their fullest potential. To accomplish this goal, I need to leave the safe harbor of academia and sail the same ocean as the teachers I help prepare.

Returning to a high school classroom was an exciting and focusing experience. I was reminded of the strengths and weaknesses of the educational system and how it works for children and adolescents. The day-to-day work invigorated me and renewed my enthusiasm for teaching. Some days were great and others were resounding flops, but in the end I suspect I learned as much as, if not more than, the students did. I will continue to return to high schools to teach, and I plan to have the Furman students in my science methods class observe me — and then teach by my side.

My time at Travelers Rest reminded me that young people are the reason I work in the field of teacher education. It was great to get to know these students and to earn their respect. While some of the issues they face have changed significantly over the last decade, I believe the heart of the teen-ager remains the same.

It is a good heart, with wonderful potential. ●

Michael Svec joined the education faculty at Furman in 1998. He is a graduate of the University of Illinois and holds a doctorate from Indiana University.