

**FINAL** REVISED MANUSCRIPT

# Steering Into The Curve

*Getting Real in the Classroom*

**Abstract:** Dozens and dozens of little deaths occur in college classrooms each day as teachers, mostly because of fear, steer themselves and their students away from what is alive and real and toward what is dead, safe and boring. In this essay I use a collection of stories to describe a practice that enlivens classroom dynamics that I call “Steering Into The Curve.”

What is life? Seriously, if you had to distill the essence of life down to one word, what word would you choose? My word is “relationship” because, as a biologist, I see clearly that the essence of life *is* relationship. Think about it: The life force animating your body right now is the result of millions of relationships (interdependencies) enacted second-by-second in your cells, tissues and organs. That any of us even exists at all is testimony to gazillions of relationships spread out through time and space. Nonetheless, the primacy of relationship is often ignored, even undermined, in schools as alluded to by Crowell et al. (1998):

*There simply is no such thing as anything separate. Nothing, absolutely nothing, exists without being a part of a set or system of relationships. Any attempt to perceive things as separate and apart is an arbitrary and false separation... There are no such divisions in life. Life does not create boundaries, we do... Hence we create curriculum as if the world were made up of separate parts and we have come to believe the parts, and not the reality of the whole (p. 61).*

Based on thirty years of experience in educational institutions, I have come to see that schooling in America, more often than not, undermines—rather than nourishes—young people’s relationship with themselves, with other humans, as well as with Planet Earth. Think about it: If schools were successful in equipping students with *relational intelligence*, doesn’t it stand to reason that, as adults, we’d be at peace with ourselves (free of addictions and self loathing); we’d be at peace with each other (free of blame, anger, violence, war); and we’d be at peace with the

natural world (free of biological destruction, toxicity, climate destabilization). Yet, the reality—that we are anything but a people at peace—suggests that something in our relating, something of our relational intelligence, is amiss.

One way out of this conundrum is to put relationship at the center of schooling (O'Reilley, 1993; hooks, 1994; Greenburg, 1995; Kessler, 2000; Brinton, 2008; Olson, 2009). After all, if the essence of life is RELATIONSHIP (as it most assuredly is) and the purpose of school is to help students be “successful” in LIFE, then it stands to reason that school, first and foremost, should be aimed at helping young people become ever-more skilled in the art and science of relationship—to become, in effect, *relationship masters*.

Of course, it is one thing to advocate relational intelligence and quite another to engender it in a college classroom. Here, using a series of stories, I lay out a practice—I call “steering into the curve” that has the power to transform classrooms from tedious, lifeless places to alive, authentic, relationship-rich environments.

### **Story 1: Learning to Name What’s in the Room**

On the first day of my environmental science class, I begin by sharing with everyone some of things that students from past years have said about the course. These comments are available on “Rate My Professor” (<http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/>). Here is a sampling:

- If you actually want to learn something, you are wasting your time by taking Uhl’s class.
- This class sucks. The prof’s lectures are dumb and boring.
- Awesome class! Learned a lot about myself and about life. Everyone at Penn State should have to take this class!!!
- Best class ever!!! I learned soooo much.

In sharing these assessments, I am steering into the curve by acknowledging what is real in the room—namely: that on the first day of class college students are sizing up their professors—they are shopping! With the intent of shedding light on this assessment process, I ask my students to look at me and tell me what they see, free of their opinions and judgments. They observe that I am a male (an assumption, actually), partly bald (apparently true), dressed in a suit coat and bowtie (true), and so forth. Next, I ask if they have formed any opinions or

judgments based on their observations. They oblige often characterizing me as a formal, conservative, eccentric, old professor.

Satisfied, I ask them to close their eyes for a moment. Then, I remove my bowtie and replace my sports coat with a black leather jacket, while wrapping a red bandana around my head. Eyes back open, I ask them to share their observations and associated opinions. Suddenly, in light of my new garb, I am seen as a laid back, aging hippie professor who probably smokes weed.

I continue by asking students to share how the different judgments and stories, growing from their two sets of observations, might lead them to feel and to act in certain ways. Some students admit that seeing me in the hippie garb leads them to feel anxious and this, in turn, might lead them to drop the course. Meanwhile other students concede that the hippie outfit creates intrigue and leaves them feeling excited and committed to stick with the class. The point, of course, is that all too often, we humans make decisions based on our cultural conditioning (e.g., “hippie→bad, coat-and-tie→good) or on the opinions of others (e.g., Rate my Professor comments), failing to rely on our own innate assessment capacities.

I conclude by sharing a more nuanced course assessment from a past student: “This class is crap if you want it to be, but it can be gold if you want it to be.” Building on this statement, I candidly explain to students that my course is designed to challenge their values and beliefs and, as such, it will likely create a measure of cognitive dissonance. Rather than reacting to new ideas with kneejerk reactions, I challenge them to sidestep their conditioning and open their minds and hearts to new ways of seeing, knowing and being.

So on the first day of class, by endeavoring to name what is true in the room, I establish an atmosphere of authenticity. At the same time I offer students a way of understanding themselves by illustrating how their observations of my dress quickly morphed into stories/judgments about me; and, then, how their stories affected how they felt and, ultimately, how they would act (e.g., stick with course or drop the course). Understanding the sequence: Observation→Story→Feeling→Action is fundamental to self-awareness.

## **Story 2—Learning to Embrace “Train Wrecks”**

My partner, Dana Stuchul (a professor in Penn State’s College of Education), uses

the term “train wreck,” to describe a classroom experience that was a disaster. Together, we have discovered that steering into the curve is the best way to avoid so-called train wrecks.

For example, I once asked the 300 students in my environmental science course to find a partner and accompany me in a “hands-on” learning experience. After everyone was seated facing their partners, I had them close their eyes and literally extend their hands to each other. Then, I asked them to actually explore the anatomy and musculature of their partner’s hands while I offered a guided visualization of the evolutionary history of the human hand from its beginnings in early pre-human life forms to the present. From the amount of nervous laughter and fidgeting going on in the room, it was apparent that this activity was bombing. Nevertheless, I plunged ahead, afraid to acknowledge the unfolding train wreck.

These days I am better at spotting and steering into, rather than away from, train wrecks. For example, recently I asked two students, Jim and Maria, to prepare a short presentation for one of my classes. They agreed but when the time came for their presentation, it was clear that they were poorly prepared. Two minutes in, I looked around at the other students and it appeared that everyone was bored and/or confused. Rather than my old response—i.e., to dwell in deadness pretending that everything was fine—this time I decided to steer into the curve and turn this train wreck into a “teachable moment.”

I began by raising my hand and asking Jim and Maria how they were feeling. They were both confused by my question so I explained that I was curious to know what they were experiencing, inside, as they were making their presentation just now? For example, were they having fun? Were they feeling confident? Both conceded that it was more like torture than fun. I asked the rest of the class to comment on how it was from their perspective as listeners. At first they were silent but, with some encouragement, one-by-one, they admitted to feeling distracted, impatient, and just plain bored.

Ahhh, yes, boredom, that familiar deadness that inevitably results when we fail to align with life. In this case, all it took to come back into alignment with life was a readiness, on my part, to steer into the curve—i.e., a readiness to give both myself and my students permission to speak what was true for them. The more we have the courage “truthspeak” as teachers, the more we give our students permission to do the same. When I falter in this regard, I remind myself that it is the truth that sets us free.

### **Story 3—Learning to Overcome the Impulse to “Cover the Material”**

Recently I gave students in a teacher preparation seminar the following assignment: Think of something that you'd like to learn and then, this week, go out and learn it!

When we gathered the following week, I explained that each person would have two minutes to tell their “learning” story. Though I wanted to give some time for this, it was only a small part of what I had planned to cover during our 3-hour class that evening.

Katrina began, telling a story about the death of the dishwasher at the restaurant where she worked. Katrina barely knew this man and felt no remorse, nor did she feign sorrow. To her surprise, she learned that by being true to herself, her calmness and realness served as a rock for several co-workers who were in deep mourning. In the process she also learned how to be a loving presence for those who were grieving without trying to fix them. Around the circle, everyone was spellbound by Katrina's story.

Next came Steph who had a beef with a man who she believed did not respect her. Steph described a process of introspection that led her to learn about her part in this stuck relationship and, in so doing, helped her to move toward freedom. Several people encouraged Steph to say more because they heard in her story echoes of their own brokenness and confusion.

Then there was Megan who described being at a fraternity party with her friends when suddenly she recognized, as if visited by some mysterious unsolicited grace, that she was tired of the party scene that her life had become. So she quietly gathered her things and departed. We all sat riveted as Megan explained how her epiphany was now empowering her to say “No” to other things in her life that no longer served her.

And so it went, one story as compelling than the next. I checked my watch and noted that the half hour I had allotted for this sharing was already over and only four people had spoken. At this rate, it would take the entire evening to share these learning stories.

Uncertain what to do, I paused to collect my thoughts. In this interval I

recalled Finkel's advice: "The outcome of the seminar must NOT be predetermined; the seminar must really be open-ended. The teacher will have hopes about what will be learned, but she must arrange things so that genuine inquiry can take place. She expects the students to make discoveries surprising to her as well as to them" (2000, p. 33). With Finkel as my guide, I realized that I would be nuts to ignore the discoveries and relationships being fostered in this moment for my pre-planned activity. Yet, isn't this what we, as teachers, so often do—in our blind determination to "cover the material," we steer away from life rather than toward it! Fortunately, in this instance, I was conscious enough to realize that I had another option. I could steer into the curve by aligning with the life, with the energy, already in the room!

But to be absolutely sure I was reading the situation correctly, I asked the class members if they felt that their time would be well spent by continuing to share these learning stories? They answered by putting their thumb up (yes), sideways (more or less) or down (no). Everyone put their thumbs up except for Maggie and so I asked her what wasn't working? She explained that she was feeling anxious because she thought her learning story was not very good. Several others volunteered that they, too, were nervous about not "measuring up" when their turn came.

Once again, steering into the curve, I observed that anytime we feel anxious or worried or afraid it is a pretty good indicator that we have left the present moment—the only real moment there ever is—to dwell in the "future" which is really an illusion—i.e., doesn't exist. I then encouraged Maggie to refrain from judging her story as this is just a form of self-judgment and leaves us mired in the past. Finally, addressing the whole circle, I asked, "What if we all give ourselves permission to stay right in the present moment and trust that when our turn comes what we say will be compelling because we will speak our present-moment truth (and not some rehearsed script)?" This, of course, takes courage. Steering into the curve—which in Maggie's case translated to living in the present moment and facing her fears—is always risky.

#### **Story 4. Learning to Really See Who is in the Room**

I teach a Freshman Seminar each year. On the first day of class I explain that the purpose of our seminar is to come together to reflect on and discuss a collection of provocative essays. I make it clear that the quality of our intellectual exchanges

will be crippled should any one of us arrive unprepared. To signal that we are there to learn from each other, I arrange the chairs in a circle. As a final touch, I have coffee and tea available, thereby creating a kind of coffee house atmosphere.

Fast forward. It is the third week of the semester and after everybody is settled I say, "Raise your hand if you have carefully done the reading for today." Only six of the twenty students raise their hands.

I am "seeing red." Then, I remember to breathe. Ten seconds. Breathe. "These students are a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings!" Breathe. Thirty seconds. "Maybe they're not lazy?" Calming myself further, I am able to acknowledge that the simple reality in this moment is that most of these people, for whatever reason(s), didn't do the reading. Then, I ask myself, "What would steering into the curve look like right now?" In other words, "How can I align myself with life, just the way it is presenting itself, in this very moment?"

I look up and take some time to really see these young people who have gathered with me. My irritation drains away as I behold each person. Etched in their faces I perceive apprehension, exhaustion, fear, sadness, as well as expectancy, enthusiasm, curiosity, and openness. Slowly it dawns on me that steering into the curve, in this instance, is about seeing opportunities hidden in what at first may appear to be a problem.

Then, absent any rancor, I observe that a fruitful discussion of the reading, in my experience, necessitates that each of us be fully prepared. Since this is not a possibility today, I reassign the reading for our next meeting, asking to be contacted ahead of time if anyone is not able to complete the reading. Everyone nods their consent.

Then, I further align with what is happening by sharing what was going on for me (i.e., how I saw "red") after I learned that only six of them had completed the reading. They listen, eyes wide open. After all, it is unusual for a teacher to make him/herself vulnerable like this.

Finally, I ask them to talk about what got in the way of their completing this reading assignment? I ask, specifically, that they go below superficial responses like "I didn't have time" and dig into what their decision to skip the reading was really all about? Many look perplexed and so I suggest that each time they come up with a reason for not doing the reading, they tack on the trailer, "and it means that..." For example, "I didn't do the reading because I didn't have time and it means that...?"

I wait knowing that to dive deep in the way I am asking takes time. Eventually Martin speaks of how he is overwhelmed by college. Noting that he is only talking to me, I pull my chair back a bit from our circle and ask Martin to talk to his classmates about being overwhelmed. Someone else speaks and soon they are talking and listening to one another.

For the first time in the semester, I begin to see who has been in the room. Especially, I become aware of each person's fundamental need to be seen, appreciated, understood, cherished. I realize, to my surprise, that I don't need these students to get anything from my seminar. What I need is **for me** to grow in my capacity to see each of them—really see them—in all their grandness and goodness amidst the shroud of suffering, ignorance and possibility that is the human condition.

By steering into the curve on this day, I create a space for everyone to be real. This is the beginning of a shift as students, in the following weeks, slowly begin to engage with each other and the course readings.

### **Story 5— Learning Not to Take Classroom Occurrences Personally**

It seems that every time I experience failure in the classroom it traces back to me taking myself too seriously—i.e., taking some classroom event personally. Knowing this to be so, these days I am on the lookout for anything that prompts my defensiveness. It could be as simple as someone arriving late to class.

In comes Brian ten minutes “late” and I think to myself, “Where has this kid been? Who does he think he is coming in late!” In that instant, filled with judgment, I step away from life—away from the reality of that moment. For the reality is that ten seconds ago Bryan wasn't in the room; now Brian is in the room. I can be in an argument with *what is* by silently fuming about Brian's lateness or I can align with *what is* by simply and genuinely welcoming Brian into the class, no questions asked. This doesn't mean that I might not check with him later to make sure he is OK but I will only do this, if and when, I am free of the illusion that Brian's lateness is wrong or bad—i.e., free of the illusion that Brian *should* be on time for me.

The same thing goes for sleeping during class. In the past when I noticed someone

sleeping in class, I would ask their neighbor to wake them up. In retrospect, this was a harsh imposition of my will—i.e., it was steering against, rather than into, the curve. After all, nobody I know likes to be wakened, much less given the task of waking another who is in peaceful slumber.

The more I thought about the sleeping student the more I came to see that my upset was only about me—my need to be respected. Lost in my own defensiveness, I failed to respect the snoozing student.

Thinking back to my own student days, there were times when I was late for class, even times when I slept in class. In those moments I would have benefited from a caring mentor who might have helped me, at an appropriate moment, look inside to decode the messages embedded in my behavior. These days I endeavor to be that mentor by steering into the curve.

## **Steering Into the Curve as Transformative Practice**

*All real living is meeting.* (Buber, 1958, p. 11)

Each of my stories is about simply bringing attention to life just as it presents itself moment to moment in the classroom. Indeed, steering into the curve is an antidote to the deadness that pervades many contemporary classrooms. This deadness exists because there is not enough real living—not enough at stake—not enough that is worthy of student’s time, much less their lives (O’Reilly, 1993).

Because much of what goes on in college classrooms lacks vitality, urgency and realness, students often draw a distinction between their classroom life and the real world. In this vein, Postman and Weingartner (1969, p. 49) posited that students and teachers mostly play the game of *Let’s Pretend*. “This game is based on a series of pretenses which include: Let’s pretend that you are not what you are and that this sort of work makes a difference to your lives; let’s pretend that what bores you is important, and that the more you are bored, the more important it is; let’s pretend that there are certain things everyone must know, and that both the questions and answers about them have been fixed for all time; let’s pretend that your intellectual competence can be judged on the basis of how well you can play *Let’s Pretend*.”

Ultimately, the responsibility to transform schools and classrooms into real places

rests with teachers. We do this by becoming real, authentic human beings ourselves (Kessler, 2000; Holt, 1976; Perrone, 1991; Hart, 2007; Tagg, 2003).

It is fear that diminishes us and keeps us pretending. And, if you haven't noticed, fear is everywhere on college campuses—in administrators, in teachers, in teaching pedagogies, in classroom layout, and in students.

In the case of students, fear is often masked by behaviors as far ranging as indifference, arrogance, obstinacy, withdrawal, obsequiousness, and silence. As teachers we are often slow to detect the fear residing in our students because of our own heavy sheath of fear. And of what are we afraid? Of our own irrelevancy, of spending our lives on trivia, of ending up feeling like frauds, of the judgment of our students, and of stagnation (Palmer, 1998). The end result of fear in school settings is separation from the flow and vibrancy of life. The practice of steering into the curve—steering into life—is a powerful antidote to this separation.

For me, ultimately, steering into the curve is about letting go of my small-minded, fear-directed agendas and steering into the unknown with all its risks and opportunities for transformative learning.

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