

Joy Lapp, Red Rocks Community College



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My experience at a community college has been as a part-time faculty member, teaching weekend-intensives. Each component of the job — community college, part-time, and weekend-intensive format — involves an interesting set of dynamics. The 100-level course I teach, *Early Christian Literature*, has never failed to bring together a dynamic mix of students who have made the weekends lively and stimulating.

Community College. A community college attracts a unique body of students. Nearly all the students in my classes are employed full-time and most are older than traditional college age. The reasons students offer for taking the class vary widely. Although a number of them are fulfilling a religion requirement for a program into which they hope to transfer, other reasons range from "an answer to prayer" to "I won three free credit hours in a drawing" to "my advisor suddenly realized that I needed three more hours to graduate in May!" from a student planning to graduate from a nearby university. Some are taking advantage of an employee benefit, so their employer pays the tuition if they do well enough. Others enroll in the class purely for personal enrichment.

Almost invariably, the students I have encountered at the community college are interested and curious and motivated. Adult learners bring a vast array of past experiences to the classroom and a level of engagement with the material that often surpasses what I find in more traditional college classes. Older students tend to be more articulate than younger students, more willing to express themselves, and simply have more experience on which to draw. They are interested in each other, and engage one another in discussion. Teaching at the community college easily ranks among the best teaching experiences that I have ever had.

Part-time. Teaching part-time has been a gift because it has allowed me to gain classroom experience while working on my dissertation. The weekend format appeals to me for the same reason that many students like it: it is compact and can fit into an already busy schedule. I only have to drive to campus six times, rather than three times a week for a full semester. The pay is far from glamorous, but has been sufficient to make the experience worthwhile. The challenge of being part-time, however, has been combating a feeling of dislocation and isolation. I have no office, nowhere to ground me on campus, nowhere to keep my things. I lug crates of books to each class. Nor do I have the chance to interact with colleagues. Because I teach on the weekend, and furthermore at an "extended campus" location, I have barely met any colleagues. If I am mulling a question or problem, there is no one next door with whom to compare notes. Since I have never taught at the main campus, I have never set foot in the Philosophy Department. I don't know how many faculty teach in the department. I communicate with the department chair, who fortunately is extremely helpful and supportive, by e-mail and phone. I miss the sense of being part of a community working toward a common purpose and the chance to develop collegial relationships. To be fair, the college does organize workshops and events specifically for part-time faculty, but my schedule has never allowed me to participate in these events. For me, however, the rewards of teaching part-time at this point in my career far out-weigh the difficulties.

Weekend Intensives. The "weekend intensive" format presents its own set of dynamics. Students gain forty hours of classroom time, which translates into three credit hours, in just three weekends. On the first weekend, the class meets four hours on Friday evening, and eight hours on Saturday; on the second weekend, we meet eight hours on Saturday, and eight hours on Sunday; on the final weekend, we meet eight hours on Saturday and four hours Sunday morning. Spending forty hours together on three successive weekends tends to create a sense of community and camaraderie among the students which engenders active participation and energetic classroom discussion. I try to enhance the community aspect of the class by keeping a pot of hot water and tea bags and instant coffee in the classroom. I bring cookies for the first Friday evening meeting, and after that students generally maintain a constant supply of snacks to share beside the teapot.

The pedagogical challenge is keeping students actively engaged for eight hours a day. I limit lecture time, and intersperse it with a variety of learning activities. We begin the first Friday evening with a time-line activity that students do in small groups, arranging a pack of cards listing events from the monarchy of King David to the writing of 2 Peter in chronological order. Then I write the time-line on the board, where it remains as a reference throughout the course to help students place all the material we cover in historical context. Students spend a good deal of class time comparing various texts — comparing parallels in the Synoptic Gospels, comparing the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke, comparing the Synoptics with John, comparing the Gospel of Thomas with the Synoptics, comparing Acts with Paul's letters and so

on. When we read Paul's letter to the Romans, students create characters and we do a simulation of a house church in Rome based on the book *Paul and the Roman House Churches: A Simulation by Reta Finger* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

By Sunday afternoon of the second weekend, there is a tendency for students to feel wrung out, so I bring popcorn and we watch movies. I use the book *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph Over Shame* (Robert Jewett, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) in which the author experiments with "bringing films and biblical texts into dialogue" (p. 4). The students divide up into various rooms throughout the building to watch *Forrest Gump*

,
Mr. Holland's Opus

,
The Shawshank Redemption

, or another of the ten films Jewett discusses. They study the Pauline text which Jewett identifies and read his discussion about the "interpretive arch" between Paul and the movie. Then they watch the movie and prepare a classroom presentation in which they show a clip of the film and analyze Jewett's "dialogue" between the ancient and modern texts. Students have generally found the activity interesting, and the presentations have at times generated heated debate. I always deliberate about the value of watching films rather than using the time to focus on the ancient text, but I continue to use the activity specifically because of the weekend format. Energies are flagging by this point in the weekend, and the films provide a needed change of pace.

Considering energy and attention-spans raises a final issue regarding the weekend-intensive format. Because of the compact nature of the course, students simply do not have as much time between classes to read and reflect as would be possible in a regular semester class. One cannot do in an eight-hour stretch what is possible in eight class periods spread over three weeks. I have to curtail reading assignments.

Although we have forty hours of class time, we simply cannot deal with as much material as in a full semester. That's the reality. However, that said, students often express amazement at the end of the course about how much they learned in such a short time.

One of the films we sometimes watch is *Babette's Feast*. In the film, a pietistic and ascetic Danish congregation is transformed when a French cook, Babette, offers to prepare a banquet

to honor the group's founder. Having renounced all pleasures of the flesh, the congregants watch in horror as Babette prepares a sumptuous spread of truffles, caviar, quail, sea turtles, wine and other dangerous pleasures. They are determined not to enjoy the feast, but the delicious foods and wine work to soften their hearts and heal unspoken quarrels which have divided people for decades. Jewett places the film in conversation with Paul's letter to the Corinthians in which the apostle urges the Christians of Corinth to allow the sharing of the love feast to build community rather than create dissension. In honor of Babette and the Corinthians, we end the class with a potluck brunch on the final Sunday morning, a celebration of the academic community we have created during the three weekends of class.