

Thad Curtz
Interviewed by Stephen Buxbaum
The Evergreen State College oral history project
August 8, 2018

Buxbaum: Good morning. This is Wednesday, August 8, 2018. I am with Thad Curtz for our third interview session.

Curtz: I was thinking about this question that you sent me, in the way of wrap-up, about stories about faculty. I didn't think I had any particular stories about faculty that seemed as if they had any general lessons of interest about the college. But there are a few things that have stuck in my head about the people I worked with that mattered to me that I thought maybe I'd talk about.

Mark Levinsky, I think, [was] a difficult teacher for lots of students. My impression is that with Mark, you either thought he was wonderful or he was terrible for you as a writing teacher. Mark told me once about these conferences—his plan for writing conferences with students—which was you read their writing, you pick out the one thing—just one thing, whatever you think is the most important thing for them to change, the worst thing about their writing, the thing they have to do something about if they're going to get any better—and then you just go for the jugular about that. [chuckles] You rub their noses in it and you hammer on them about it. Because otherwise, if you try to talk about everything, it will just all go right by them. It's really difficult to make an impression, I think Mark thought, about anything like this. I taught writing, and I ended up with quite a few students who had been writing students of Mark's one way and another, and they either thought Mark was great, or he practically ruined them as writers, they were so shell-shocked as a result of the experience and they'd hated it so much.

But Mark was, I think, one of the most creative teachers that I've ever worked with, in the sense of having interesting, ingenious ideas about how to get at the material. I strongly suspect that this idea in the Western Civ program that I did with Mark [where] when we got to the third quarter, we wanted to do something about women in America. We looked at all these books and they were about women who had committed suicide, or artists. None of them seemed like a very good fit for our students trying to think about women's lives in America. And I'm pretty sure it was Mark who came up with this idea about "We'll have them study their mothers." As a project for the quarter, they'll interview their mothers, and I think that was pretty typical of the sorts of things that Mark dreamed up to do.

He cared enormously about clarity. He'd get up on the board and he'd draw all these diagrams—boxes—and things were inside the box or they were outside the box. That was it.

The thing that actually started me thinking that I was going to talk about is my first year teaching with Mark, or maybe the second year. Anyway, we had this kind of term paper project for students, and we went to great lengths to tell them that . . . I don't even remember what the topic was, but the big thing about it was that it was not supposed to be a standard term paper that regurgitated what various sources had said, and more or less plagiarized or quoted at length—So-and-So says this, and So-and-So says that and So-and-So says the other thing.

Various students did better or worse about this, but I got one student who did exactly what we had said they weren't supposed to do. I think most of what he turned in had been pasted out of encyclopedias. I was trying to figure out what to do about this student, and Mark said, "Don't bitch at him about it. Just say, 'So, you've got a start here, but it's not done yet. You still have to do A, B, C and D. You can have another month to work on it and bring it back then and we'll talk about it.'" I thought that was very smart.

Other people . . . Marilyn Frasca, who I think has been an enormously important teacher for lots and lots of art students. [When] Marilyn arrived at the college, Peter Elbow and I had basically already planned Self-Exploration Through Autobiography, which we were going to teach. Marilyn was arriving as a new faculty member. She'd been on the East Coast, in New Hampshire or wherever she was living then for the whole summer. She got [here]. We'd ordered all these books. We had our first meeting, and we talked for a while and Marilyn said, "I can't do that." [laughter] I think Peter and I sat up straight. We were not expecting anybody to say that. Maybe it was Words, Sounds and Images that we were teaching. I think it probably was. So, we kind of scrambled and figured out how to make things fit with things that Marilyn thought she wanted to do, and could do.

The important thing that sticks in my head about Marilyn's work as a teacher really is—I remember having this little conversation with her once where she said, "The trouble with most student art shows is you go to see the art show and everybody's pictures look like the teacher's." I don't know whether it just started with her, but I think that one of the ongoing commitments and leitmotifs maybe of the art programs at Evergreen has been helping students figure out how to do their own work instead of doing the teacher's work, or doing the work that the teacher thinks they ought to be doing.

Coming back from Seattle, we stop at the UW-Tacoma. We've got 15 minutes or something between the time we get off the Seattle bus and the time the bus to Olympia arrives. Every week, we go up to one of the buildings to go to the bathroom, and the last several years there's been a little student

art show in the corridor there. Looking at those pictures, it's just striking how much better the work that you see at end-of-the-year shows from Evergreen programs in art is than what you see there.

Who else? [chuckles] Byron Youtz I only knew a little bit. A really terrific person, I think, but he was an extremely good person in some way that I guess is probably kind of complicated. But I think somebody told me about Byron saying at some point, "My duty, and therefore my inclination, my responsibility and therefore my desire, is to do X." Kant says that this is only the case for angels. For most people, morality is doing what you don't want to do, and the number [of thoughts? 00:08:58] it's supposed to be only the angels for whom desire and obligation match up perfectly. Anyway, I think that's pretty typical of what sort of person Byron was. I sat at lunch with Bryon once and watched him. He had this lunch, which I assume Bernice had packed for him. There was a pear which was brown, and Byron ate the whole thing. [laughing] So that made me think maybe I didn't want to be quite that good.

Who else? I guess one way of thinking about the frame for this is, what should the college be looking for when it thinks about who to hire? I think my impulse about this, given the sort of person I am, is that the college ought to hire people who have been very good at being regular academics, and are good at doing something else, too. With all due respect, one of my long-term structural concerns about the Evening and Weekend Studies program has been it drastically reduced the pool of people from which we hired. Instead of hiring people from all across the country, we hired whoever was around in Olympia. Sometimes that's worked out really well, but over time, gradually those people have ended up becoming the regular faculty. Statistically speaking, my personal view is that the college probably would have done better if it could have figured out some way, if we had to have evening, if we had to have courses, figuring out some way to have faculty that we'd hired in national searches, who were regular, full-time faculty from the beginning, would have served the college better.

What was that a digression from? Hmm. Byron. Peter.

Buxbaum: You were saying that this might be about the question of how the college would go about hiring people.

Curtz: Yeah. Other things I learned things from. I learned a lot from Peter Elbow about teaching writing. Fundamentally, this idea, which was what made Peter famous, about make a mess and then fix it up afterwards. Separate your creative self from your editing self, instead of trying to do them both at the same time. That was very useful for me, because I spent most of my time in college writing on a little, tiny Olivetti typewriter before there was correction fluid. I guess correction fluid had come in, but I would write half a sentence and then I'd have to roll the paper out of the typewriter and erase

something, and roll it back in and try to get it lined up and corrected. So, I was exactly the opposite of the kind of writer that Peter thought would be a useful and effective kind of writer to be.

Peter was a perfect example. Peter was somebody who had been, I think, an excellent student, and also a bad boy at the same time, an altar boy who had gone bad, and took a kind of, I think, delight in publicly advocating for breaking the rules. I remember once his saying that it was really odd for him to come to Evergreen because, in all of his previous life as an academic, he'd been the radical, the wild-eyed person in the community, and he came to Evergreen and all of a sudden, he was conservative!
[laughing]

Anybody else? Yeah, Rob Knapp. I have an image that sticks, the picture that I like the best of Rob is he's standing in front of his blackboard with a lot of equations and stuff written on it, and he's scratching his head quizzically, sort of looking puzzled. I think he, more than anybody else I taught with, has a kind of gift as a master of ceremonies, as a host. He's really terrific, just the sort of person he is, at making everybody in the program feel as if they're at home and they're having a good time. He makes things hospitable. Lots of faculty, I think, do not have that gift, and I think probably if you're going to run full-time programs, it's an important factor. It's important to have somebody, preferably the coordinator, but somebody is going to fill that job anyway, who can do that.

Jean Mandeborg, another very creative person, especially about, I think maybe . . . I don't know if better than anybody I ever worked with, but certainly extremely good at figuring out how to come up with assignments which would work for those students that she was basically committed to teaching—the studio art students—and would also be intimately and usefully connected to the themes that we were working on. So, in the Weird and Wonderous programs, everybody did all of this kind of theoretical reading, and literature reading, and psychology, and social anthropology and various other things about the experience of wonder the experience of weirdness, and everybody did studio art projects. There were six weeks about travel, and six weeks about monsters, and six weeks about dreaming. So, four themes. Six weeks about magicians. Sometimes I had ideas, too, but basically Jean came up with the ideas for the studio art projects.

So, for the travel thing, students had to make an amulet—one of these things that you wear around your neck to protect you from evil spirits while you're traveling—a personal amulet. There was some exercise about creating a map. They had to do a passport for themselves. I thought they were fabulous assignments, because they worked for the studio art students, and they also made everybody think in personal and interesting and educational ways about the other material that we were working on.

That's my short list, I think. Don Finkel was a friend of mine for a long time. We became estranged at some point, but anyway, I suppose he's the person who I think about as being the most like me on the faculty. We were philosophy students at Yale together, and he was an extremely good student, and very good at figuring out how to tie all sorts of things together; to bring together, in his case, this developmental psychology stuff that he had worked on, and Dewey and Marx. It was really fun to work with him.

It's just like the students, you know. It's very nice to work with people who are kind of basically—it's sort of like marriage, too, I suppose—it's nice to work with people who are like you, and sometimes it's nice to work with people who are really different from you. [chuckles] The people who are sort of like you are not so interesting maybe.

So, that's my short list.

Buxbaum: Good. For the good of the order, anything else at this point?

Curtz: I don't think so.

Buxbaum: Okay. Let's call it a wrap.