



ENGAGED IN THE FRESHMAN SEMINAR CLASSES

by Hal Jacobs

It's a crisp, gorgeous autumn day and fifteen first-year students and their professor, Dana White, are boarding a shuttle bus parked near White Hall. Given that this freshman seminar class deals with the history of Atlanta and White has hosted a local PBS documentary series on the subject, you might expect the professor to act as tour guide as the shuttle drives through some of Atlanta's most historic neighborhoods. You might also expect today's class to visit a distinguished stopping-off place such as the Georgia State Capitol or the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site.

Instead of commandeering their attention, however, White stays in the background and allows the students to relax, talk among themselves or remain quiet and watchful. And today's destination is none other than Turner Stadium, home of the Atlanta Braves, for a behind-the-scenes tour led by a knowledgeable stadium guide.

Days later, I ask White why he chose the stadium tour over a more conventional historic site. He thinks about it for a moment, then replies, "Because the stadium wasn't as warm and fuzzy."

As for not playing the conventional role of the friendly, informative tour guide, there's another reason for that. **If I've learned anything this semester, it's that good teachers know when to keep their mouths shut.**

On paper, the basic concept behind Emory's freshman seminar class is fairly straightforward. First-year students choose one class in the first or second semester from a wide and eclectic assortment of seminars. Professors build the seminars around their scholarly interests, expertise and passion (for example, White is a huge baseball fan). Because of the small class size, usually less than fifteen students, the seminar "creates a special kind of camaraderie," says Robert Brown, assistant dean for undergraduate education.

"It's an opportunity for students to get to know a professor in a different way," Brown explains. "Often, at this stage, they've gotten to know their high school teachers. Many want to get to know their college professors in a more substantive way, but they find it difficult or they're intimidated. So in a freshman seminar, they get that unique opportunity."

But when you look under the hood, how does it really work? That is, how does a veteran scholar, who might be expected to spend his days with upper-level students and delving deeply into

his own research, approach first-year students who are just learning the rules of the game? How does he set the stage for their academic career at Emory, without giving them stage fright?

To obtain a close-up view, I became an embedded journalist for a semester in White's class on the history of Atlanta. During the last thirty-five years White, now seventy-two, has built a distinguished career and reputation around his work as a teacher, public historian, museum and media consultant, dissertation adviser and administrative leader at Emory's Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts (ILA). In the last couple of years, he has decided to focus more on teaching freshmen than on training graduate students.

"People sense a sort of gracious informality about him—something that draws students to him," says Walter Reed, ILA chair and the William Rand Kenan, Jr. University Professor. "And he has a kind of sincerity and honesty that is not defensive and not aggressive. He's always good at seeing the sense of the comic in human behavior. I'm not sure if it's a question of temperament or experience."



or people that they identify with their hometown and with their new home, Atlanta. It's a comfortable icebreaker: as students reveal a little about themselves, they also reveal flashes of their personality, curiosity and doubts. Instead of lecturing, White listens to them, occasionally asking questions and relating a few stories about his own hometown of New York City.

After the break, White encourages students to talk about their first reading assignment, a book written by a colleague, whom White usually refers to by first name. At one point during a lull in the conversation, he asks, "Is there anything you didn't believe in Andy's book?" Judging from their silence, my guess is that they haven't heard many teachers question the accuracy of a book that was assigned reading.

The rest of the class unfolds around a BBC radio show, "Food Programme," that was recorded in Atlanta. The voice of the crisp British host contrasts nicely with his interview subjects, whose voices range from genteel to rural to urban to evangelical.

"What do you hear?" White asks. With a bit of uncertainty at first, students begin sharing ideas. White nods, without offering opinions or commentary of his own. Because he's not leading or directing the conversation in Socratic

fashion, no one is quite sure what he's looking for or what he wants to hear—which is exactly the point. He doesn't tell them, but he chose this particular exercise to give them an unfiltered experience that is quite different from the textbook reading.

Over the course of the semester, White will continue to "teach with his mouth shut." It's an interesting approach, especially for those of us who equate the best teachers with those who deliver the most scintillating lectures or engage students in dramatic debate until the students finally reach the correct answer.

I had never heard of this concept until I talked with Reed, a former director of the Center for Teaching and Curriculum. During a conversation about White's teaching style, Reed walked over to his bookshelf and drew out a slim book by Donald Finkel that takes this precept as its title. (Later, when I asked White about it, he admitted that he hadn't studied this teaching methodology and was simply doing what came naturally.)

One of the principles behind this teaching approach originated with philosopher and educator John Dewey, who once wrote that

Teaching with your mouth shut

At the first class meeting, White wants to meet privately with students to review the syllabus, as well as see if they have any objections to the embedded-journalist concept. Although several College deans already have signed off on the plan, White wants to give the students an opportunity, as he says, "to vote me off the island."

A few days later, White hands me a copy of the syllabus and talks about his goals for the class. Basically, he wants to introduce the research process and make students more aware of their contemporary environment. He's not trying to turn them into experts on Atlanta so much as give them tools to use in other metro areas. He expects the city to be the teacher, and sees himself more as a guide or coach.

In the second class, I join the freshmen—nine young men, six young women—seated with White around a large seminar table in the Callaway Building. By way of introduction, students go around the table and mention significant facts, events

“no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another.” Rather, we learn from experience—by creating the conditions in which individuals generate their own ideas, manually switching on their own light bulbs of understanding. And one powerful way to do this is by telling stories.

The Power of Stories

If White’s students have learned anything about the history of Atlanta by the third class, it is that their professor seems to have a personal story about everyone mentioned in their assigned readings or in-class audios or movies. (White is also a classic movie buff.)

When he talks about his early days as a faculty member at Atlanta University—his department chair was a colleague of W. E. B. DuBois and a teacher of Martin Luther King Jr.—he covers quite an influential slice of Atlanta history. When, a few weeks later, students read a short essay by DuBois, they can almost feel a

Getting out of the Classroom

The field trips perfectly illustrate White’s approach to teaching freshmen. Instead of acting as a tour guide as the class visited the Atlanta History Center, Emory Library’s archives and Turner Stadium, White steps back and lets the students learn on their own, or from each other, or from experts other than himself.

At the history center, he sets students loose to meander through the exhibitions with the idea they would select a few exhibits to write about for next week’s class. Afterward, he turns students over to talk with Gordon Jones, the center’s vice president of exhibitions and collections, as well as an Emory doctoral student working with White on his dissertation. Rather than lecturing, Jones holds a conversation with students, giving them an in-depth, personal, behind-the-scenes look at telling the history of a particular place.

Not surprisingly, Jones is a big fan of White’s teaching style. “Kids in most history classes are forced to memorize dates,” he says.



(standing, left to right) Michelle Trone, Hal Jacobs, Samantha Griner, Leigh Ann Kabatra, Brian Alexander, Walter Bergeson, Jonathan Endelman, Jesse Grossman, Brett Weinstein, Mary Alexander Myers, J. B. McGuffie; (sitting, left to right) Lindsey Colman, Steven Fortner, Dana White, Danny Turton, Katherine Thompson (not pictured, Ryan Lacey)

personal connection. Likewise, when White talks about working with Mrs. Ivan Allen on an Atlanta History Center exhibit, or his friendly verbal jousts with Maynard Jackson (his favorite Atlanta mayor), or looking into Henry Aaron’s eyes during an interview and catching a brief glimpse of the man’s home-run-hitting intensity, or talking with Mrs. Uhry (on whom the film *Driving Miss Daisy* was based), or getting a job under the Tammany Hall system of government, or simply observing Andy Young at a Hawks basketball game, White tells the story in such a way that he’s not the main character—just the main observer. The moral of the stories is simple. Pay attention to what’s going on around you. Listen closely. Think for yourself.

“But it’s best to show them how to learn and explore—let them figure out stuff for themselves. That’s what Dana is doing. He’s giving them the tools to learn with. It’s very healthy.”

On the field trip to Emory’s Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library (MARBL), Randy Gue, another of White’s doctoral students, introduced students to their “new best friend” at Emory—primary resources. By way of introduction, Gue gave students a fascinating firsthand account of digging through troves of printed and handwritten papers to sniff out the true meaning of archival holdings. Near the end of his presentation, Gue acted as if he was ready to lead students over the ramparts, saying, “Free yourself from electronic bondage. Come here and work in three dimensions.”

It's All about Process

Early on, White told me that his basic structure for this class is “build slowly, then barge ahead.” In the remaining one-third of the semester, now that students have a comfortable foundation in Atlanta’s history and a growing confidence in themselves, he directs their attention to the rigor and requirements of the research process. Given that they must follow this process to complete their final papers, which represent most of their grade for the semester, he has their full attention.

When White talks about doing research, especially about asking the right questions, it’s as close as he ever gets to preaching sermonettes. Privately, he admits that he’s mindful of talking too passionately about a subject. “If you come on too strong with students, they’re going to have a hard time believing you.”

And if he’s adamant about one thing, he wants them to know that “process is more important than the end result.” His words have the desired effect of reassuring the students as they

musings over possibilities and haven’t begun working “in three dimensions.”

After the class is over, White confides cheerfully, “I couldn’t have planned it any better.” He knew in advance that this student’s research was weeks ahead of the others—and was fairly certain that her presentation would make a powerful impression on the others.

With about four classes remaining in the semester, it happens: one of those magical days in the classroom. During the last couple of weeks, the students’ passion, mostly driven by discoveries they have made in the course of their research projects, has been steadily building. On this particular day, a few students talked about their projects with a degree of precision and enthusiasm that set off sparks, making the entire classroom seem charged with a hair-tingling feeling.

Alfred North Whitehead once described how this “atmosphere of excitement . . . transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no

IN THEIR OWN WORDS PROFESSOR WHITE’S STUDENTS ON HIS FRESHMAN SEMINAR CLASS

“This class is *nothing* like any high school class I took. It’s far more open and the freedom we have to pursue any topic that interests us in the final project is unprecedented in my experience.”

“This class includes many more stories and rich narratives than one would expect to find in a traditional history class. Many of these stories come from Professor White’s personal experience, something you can get nowhere else.”

“I intend to be a history major and I thought that this class would be a conventional history seminar. However, I have found that Professor White incorporates sociological, political, and even psychological elements into the class (e.g., studying the personalities of leaders such as Maynard Jackson, watching the Sousa video, and listening to the tape about Southern food). I do not think there are many classes like this!”

begin their first big Emory research project at the same time that they face midterms in other classes, the “freshman fifteen” extra pounds, a fall fiesta party in the dorm, and the first visit by parents since they left home. (“What do I do with them?” one student implores the others before class begins. “Let them take you out to dinner,” they counsel.)

When it’s time for students to begin pitching their research projects to their classmates, White calls on a student who delivers a presentation that is so meticulously organized and thoroughly grounded in primary documents that her classmates are visibly wowed. At this early stage of the game, most of them are still

longer a burden on the memory: it is energising as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes.”

And what made this particular classroom experience so impressive, especially to an embedded reporter, is that most of the time the students were talking to each other, as if there were no professor in the room.

The next day, I happened to be crossing the Quad when I saw White approaching from a different direction. As soon as we saw each other, we started grinning, both of us thinking the same thing.

He spoke first. “Wasn’t that a great class yesterday?”∞