

### TEACHING PHILOSOPHY of Robert Burkholder

The keys to my teaching philosophy for the past fifteen years have been creativity, engagement, and experience. Back then I was simply not happy with the results my work in the classroom was producing. I felt as though the Humanities had become increasingly abstract since the time I had entered the profession in the 1970s and at that moment the so-called greening of the Humanities was much in the academic news with the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment and the publication of a few important new works of what was being called ecocriticism. Some ecocriticism even dealt with issues related to course design and teaching. Since my academic specialty is American Romantic writers, like Emerson and Thoreau, it was somewhat natural for me to move from nineteenth-century writers who spent a lot of their careers thinking and writing about the meaning of the human relationship to nature to experimenting with an expanded repertoire of American nature writing and finding ways to teach it in a natural context or with an enhancement trip or experience to ground the literature's abstraction in activity and experiential immersion. In a sense, it occurred to me that students might understand the abstract ideas of writers more readily if they experienced the natural contexts that inspired their ideas and the expression of them.

It took just about all the creativity I could muster at the time to try to figure out exactly how to do what I wanted to do. Initially, I tried adding a weekend wilderness experience (at first in the Hickory Creek Wilderness of the Allegheny National Forest). We would share the gear we had with each other and head out from campus with Thoreau, or Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard, or Gary Snyder resonating in our brains. I still have the most vivid memories from those early outings—students struggling through an extensive area of blown down trees and finally reaching the end of it at the same time that a bright spring sun emerged from behind the clouds and then the pungent odor of evergreens that seemed to pour over us as we hiked out on an old logging railway bed. It was magical, and it encouraged my efforts to move a bit beyond my classroom, or rather to open the classroom up to include nature. It pleased me to learn that Academe itself is the name of the grove of olive trees outside Athens where Plato taught, although I suspect that my efforts to teach classes while hiking, white water rafting, rock climbing, etc., are finally somewhat less effective than Plato's.

I believe that there are two types of engagement in the most successful teaching. The first is the teacher's complete engagement with his subject and his students in the classroom. I believe I share this sort of engagement with most of the faculty at Penn State. The second is the full engagement of the student with the subject being taught, something that can only really be achieved through the opportunities and ideas being offered by the instructor. This second type of engagement requires teachers to go beyond modeling their own engagement with their subjects, and it goes beyond the conveying of facts. It is the sort of engagement that requires immersing students in what they are studying and providing meaningful educational experiences for them beyond the traditional classroom. This is the sort of education that one finds frequently in small liberal arts colleges and, outside of the Schreyer Honors College at Penn State, it is not the sort of learning experience that is readily available to most Penn State students. My department and college and Penn State Outreach provided me with the opportunities I needed to attempt to pursue the goal of both types of engagement in my teaching, and the result is the Adventure Literature Series, a program that I began in 2000 that takes students way beyond their classroom work. The students I have taken to the Grand Canyon, to the swamps of South Carolina, or to the Great Beach on Outer Cape Cod have been, for the most part, fully engaged with what I am teaching. I remember a student turning to me and saying, as we sat in the warm blue-green waters of Havasupai Creek in a remote part of Arizona on our last day of following the explorer John Wesley Powell down the Colorado River, "It doesn't get any better than this." I have felt the same when I have seen a setting or experience light up a student's face with the realization that what she is seeing and feeling and thinking is truly changing her life in the most positive ways.

The opportunities and challenges presented to me in building and working in the Adventure Literature Program have convinced me of what the writer Barry Lopez calls "the authority of first-hand encounters," and so my philosophy of engagement quickly became one that emphasizes the idea of providing students with the experiences that give them first-hand encounters with the places, people, or activities we read about, discuss and study in the classroom—with a Chesapeake Bay waterman fishing his pound net, a Colorado River raftsman, a fisherman poet, an alligator hunter, or an Adirondack guide. For me, it has become a mission, and I have continued and will continue to try to find new places and experiences for my students that will make both them and the literature I am teaching come alive.