

The Joy and Ease of Using Professional Experience to Enhance Students' Classroom Experience

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Each instructor who teaches online not only brings classroom presence and a dedication to students but also professional or industry experience. This is a huge bonus for our students, as it allows us to take the theoretical and the words on a text—and make them come alive! This “reality-based education” is crucial, for students learn that what they are being taught extends far beyond the classroom and into “the real world”—their professions, their jobs, their entire lives.

We cannot simply dump our professional experience into a classroom, of course, and expect students to pull gems from it to help them. No—we must adroitly choose the when, where, how, and why of its use ... and guide, suggest, and implement this valuable teaching tool into the byways and alleyways of our courses.

The suggestions in this column are simply that: suggestions. Use them as is, or tweak, twist, and turn them to fit the needs of your classroom. Each does work—and each will help bridge the gap between

your life as a professional and your life as an educator ... so there is no gap.

NOTES

- My professional experience is that of a writer, speaker, and educator (as consultant to the U.S. government and other universities), and thus I transition from these into my classroom. However, this column is focused on anyone who teaches and has a professional background directly or indirectly related to the school subject area(s) taught.
- Because of the subject varieties taught, types of professions, and approaches of instructors there are a gazillion ways professional experience can be used in the classroom—what I offer certainly work ... but I beg, implore, beseech, and entreat you to please send me additional suggestions that have worked for you: erroldistancelearning@gmail.com—I'll include them in the next issue!

THE SUGGESTIONS

Snippets of Errol's professional background—but with a purpose ...

- author, four published books (three more in progress);
- write two columns on distance learning for *Distance Learning*;
- editorial consulting for U.S. government and corporations;
- contributing columnist, *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *USA Today*;
- former cultural editor, *Southern Living* magazine;
- former assistant editor, *The National Enquirer* (based in Hollywood 6 months);
- professional speaker, 7 years (all 50 states, 7 foreign countries);
- one of 25 national members, Online Writing Instructors Standards Committee, National Council Teachers of English; and
- former owner, career counseling firm ... former professional chef.

And the purpose is ... it's a buffet from which I can pick and choose:

- something of reality to remind students what they are learning is not merely for a grade;
- an interesting or fun item from my professional background to help engage, while making a serious point;
- an experience that had hiccups or didn't work out as planned as a way of explaining how we learn from mistakes;
- one or more writing projects, speaking gigs, or editorial forays as a reminder of how intensive time and much effort are involved to get them right—and for people to want more from you; and
- material that is always fresh, newly minted, and cutting edge.

And what about you ... Think about one aspect of your professional background that you have somehow employed in the

classroom—and consider how you use/used it!

The professional experience must be integrated to the students' level ...

- It can be too easy to use language we would share or exchange with colleagues.
- When industry acronyms or abbreviations are used—be sure they are explained.
- Make a game or challenge at times: offer ideas, info, et cetera at your professional level—and have students discover their meaning.

Make use of your mistakes as a professional ...

- that we made errors, learned from them, and overcame them: a powerful teaching tool;
- don't hesitate to share these "uh-ohs"—they humanize;
- expand student errors on assignments to what might happen if the same occurs in "the real world."

✓ My Turn:

I was at one time editor of a 250,000+ circulation magazine in Atlanta, and as editor it was my responsibility to give a final sign-off on all content before the magazine went to print. One feature of the magazine was a foldout calendar—four times the size of the magazine when unfolded—and the name of each month was at the top, the largest font in the magazine. For a September issue I did not look over the calendar, as I assumed no-one would misspell the name of a month—and certainly not in such a large font. I was wrong: "September" was spelled "Sepetmber," and I did not catch it—and I was bombarded by readers for this oversight!

✓ Your turn ...

Think of a professional mistake you

made, and how you have used it/could use it as a “teaching moment” for your students!

Connect the subject taught to the real world you know ...

- this takes the classroom from “laboratory” and “just-gotta’-get-a-good-grade” status to an appetizer of reality;
- look for those “aha!” moments of linkage in all course components; and
- include that “real world” in assignment feedback.

EXAMPLES: Include that “real world” in assignment feedback—

1. “Ah—that thesis statement you wrote: employers look for concise and easy-to-understand ones in so-called executive summaries.”
2. Professional Alert: Great insight! Remember: this use of critical thinking is always appreciated by employers, colleagues, and customers!

Showcase industry honors and awards to teach—never to brag ...

- Professional accomplishments can establish over-the-top gravitas.
- Pouring out honors, kudos, and some experience for no other reason except to pour out can backfire.
- Include one unusual, interesting, or fun item from your background; this can create a “Wow!” factor and can you appear more like “a real person”!

✓ My turn:

For 2 weeks I worked as intern for Bob Dylan, when I was an undergrad student ... I am an Eagle Scout.

✓ Your turn:

Think of one unusual, interesting, or fun item from your background—how

would you use it to create a “Wow!” factor and you appear more like “a real person”!

Stress the importance of sharing and receiving input of others ...

- Professional folks who work as islands make more mistakes.
- Use industry conferences and other professional interactions to help motivate student discussions, live chat you might use, and any group assignments.
- Give occasional examples of how another’s input in your field proved helpful—expands your and students’ feedback and responses to what comes after the degree.

Pick some well-known folks in your subject—and remind them they weren’t born that way ...

- One of my lines that works well: “No-one was born saying ‘goo-goo, ga-ga, thesis statement!’”
- A good opportunity to use your professional background ... and its beginnings.
- Ask students to pick a professional they admire—and what early mistakes they may have made.

Discuss the challenges and effort needed to achieve your level of professional expertise ...

- a story from your background in accomplishing this is a great motivator;
- reminds students that everyone has a first day, first month—and first time; and
- ask students to share one item in their background that took time and effort to master.

Use portions of your professional experience for student resources (if possible) ...

- Create resources specific to your course and subject(s) that pull from professional experience and knowledge.
- Include an anecdote or piece of info that ties the resource into the world beyond college.
- Ask students for suggestions on resources that would help—and look to your professional background for assistance in developing these.

Relate professional memberships to growth in the classroom ...

- Conferences, newsletters, and interactions with colleagues all offer valuable material that can segue into assignments, live chats, announcements, and e-mails.
- Ask students about any professional memberships they have or might consider—and how these might help in the classroom.

Explain the reality of people, the importance of listening, the beauty of discussion, the necessity of embracing ...

- all tie directly into careers—and what is needed to succeed in careers; and
- offer an example from your professional involvement that fortifies and explains an assignment or other component of the course.

Use knowledge of other professions to re-enforce and offer insight ...

- gives stronger substance to the course subject;
- offers a reminder that your course subject is not the most important one outside of the classroom; and
- ask students for input on one or more noncourse subjects that fit nicely into the course—and why.

Ask students for input on one or more noncourse subjects that fit nicely into the course—and why:

✓ My turn:

History—it often ties in the stories behind why we write certain ways and give strong examples of why citations are crucial for any writing with research.

✓ Your turn:

Think of one or more noncourse subjects that would fit nicely into one of your courses—and why.

SOME HELPFUL LINKS

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND SOCIETIES

- Writers' associations:
<http://writersrelief.com/writers-associations-organizations/>
- Professional business associations:
<http://www.rasmussen.edu/degrees/business/blog/top-professional-associations-for-business-students/>
- Professional associations based in the United States:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Professional_associations_based_in_the_United_States
- Professional health organizations:
https://medlineplus.gov/organizations/all_organizations.html
- U.S. societies and associations:
<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0004878.html>
- Criminal justice associations and organizations:

<http://www.criminaljusticedegreezone.com/criminal-justice-associations-and-organizations.html>

- Professional associations in education:

<http://www.unm.edu/~jka/sts/proforg.html>

- Math organizations and associations:

<http://math.about.com/od/organizations/>

<http://www.teachhub.com/top-12-ways-bring-real-world-your-classroom>

- Classroom Connections to Real Life Experiences

<http://teachersnetwork.org/ntol/howto/implement/connect.htm>

- Experience: The Best Teacher

http://www.educationworld.com/a_tech/tech/tech189.shtml

WEBSITES WITH A FOCUS ON USING EXPERIENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

- 12 Ways to Bring Experience Into the Classroom

Remember: Never leave professional experience on one side of the river; build a bridge that links it to your classroom.