I looked at her but could not remember her name. I was warned that this moment would come. My brain was frantically searching for an answer as we stood together in the middle of a busy grocery store aisle during the Christmas holiday break. After two years of teaching high school, I had already worked with over 500 students in my overcrowded classes. Should I be expected to remember every one of them? The uncomfortable silence lingered as I wished she would offer me an escape from my distress.

“Hey, Mr. Fox, it’s Allyson from your Comm class from last year.” Of course. She was an introverted student yet rarely spoke up in class. However, she was a listener. She had a brother with Autism if I recall. I remembered that too.

“I just wanted to tell you that I just took Comm 101 at TCU, and it was the worst class. You already taught me most of what was covered, and the prof was so boring. He did not engage us at all. You really need to be teaching college Comm; it would be perfect for you.”

As a teacher, unsolicited positive affirmations are profound cup fillers. Allyson had just offered more feedback than I had received from her during the entire semester I had her in my communication class. I never knew how she felt, and I never told Allyson the paradigm shift her comment triggered.

During the following five years that I remained a communications teacher, I would often hear from alumni of my classes that they thought I was better suited for higher ed communication teaching. Every time it chipped away at my hesitancy and strengthened the belief in myself that Allyson had started. I knew that my undergrad communications degree from Syracuse University and my successful career in the film industry had provided a relevant communication foundation to build upon. However, I was not ready not make the move. There was more I wanted to learn about K-12 education, particularly experiential education.

I suffered from doubt that my relational teaching style and philosophy would not resonate outside of the protected confines of suburban Austin, Texas. My teaching philosophy encompasses three interconnected schools of thought. The first is the belief that students will not care how much you know until they know how much you care. Gleaned mostly from the message of Flip Flippen from *Capturing Kids Hearts*, it taught me to connect with students. Ask questions, engage students, and let them know I was interested in their lives and invested in their learning.

My next pedagogical pillar is to teach holistically. Introduced to me by a few select teaching mentors, I was encouraged to meet learners from where they were coming from. It is the understanding that each student arrives with their own gifts, skills, challenges, and life experiences. There is not only the academic need of the learner but the social, emotional, and ethical needs. Making learning relevant to every student is the goal. It took years for me to find clarity around this way of teaching, but I finally found the engaged pedagogy of bell hooks to be my guide.

Lastly is experiential education. It was my next stop after the classroom. I had the opportunity to work with students from around the world in Washington D.C., New York, and California. I learned the transformative power of discussing a topic, experiencing a concept first-hand, and then debriefing the experience. I was overwhelmed by the impact of how high-level concepts in filmmaking, government, and project management could be learned at an accelerated pace in experiential environments.

My biggest takeaway from working in experiential education was that high school students are the same, wherever they come from. They each have their own stories, challenges, heartaches, and dreams. Some of the universal themes they shared are that they are truly worried about the world which awaits them. In the meantime, their voices go unheard in an education system they find dull, disconnected, and lacking relevance. It is a theme I heard for years, and one that Allyson so eloquently reminded me of during our brief but impactful encounter.

It was not until I was away from students that I realized it was time to start my Gonzaga journey. I have been working in the EdTech world for the past five years, spending most of my time supporting teachers and school districts across the nation with curriculum and instructional tools to help students succeed. It is rewarding work, but I still have more to offer to young adults who are just getting started finding their purpose and career path. My dad once told me that if I am lucky, I will still feel young as I age. Fortunately, I am a lucky man, but my children should receive most of the credit. Digital natives of the age of 22 and 25, they help this 53-year-old digital immigrant feel connected to the world we live in.

I have been fortunate to have experienced two rewarding careers of equal length. I still have more to give, and I am motivated to continue to make a difference. One day soon I will make good on Allyson’s hope for me.

W. Fox

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