

SERENDIPITY

Lately, as I age, I have been reflecting on events that marked major turning points in my life. What I've found is that almost all of these events involved a lucky or improbable occurrence, so to speak, **serendipity**. To make this idea concrete, let me share a brief narrative of some fortuitous event(s) that led me to choose teaching as a career.

- Unlike most of the job candidates we see today, I received my terminal degree (PhD in environmental and resource economics) without ever having an opportunity to teach a course. My graduate studies prepared me with a singular focus, to be a skillful researcher: a model builder and a number cruncher.
- Thus, it was no surprise that my first job was as 'a research fellow' in the department of resource economics at the University of Rhode Island – again, with no classroom responsibilities. My primary charge was to conduct empirical studies to determine the 'optimal' fishing power (boat size and fishing gear) to be used by the artisanal (small scale) fisheries of Costa Rica in the Gulf of Nicoya. This was an economic development project fully funded by American International Aid (AID) for a period of three years.
- In many respects, this job was ideal for someone who was trained as a number cruncher since the data for the empirical study was already collected during the prior phase of the research project.
- Despite this, some level of uneasiness started to creep in my mind as I began to see the implications of the preliminary results of my research. It did not seem quite right to conduct research that could profoundly alter the way of life for comparatively powerless people living in a country that I knew nothing about.
- While I was in this state of mind and half-way into my first year at the University of Rhode Island (January 1979), I received an

unexpected request from one of my colleagues. He asked me to fill in for him in the classroom while he was attending a conference in Australia, by giving two guest lectures on the theory of renewable resources. This experience represented my initial exposure to teaching in a formal setting. From this experience, I came to realize that teaching could be both engaging and fun!

- Three months later, April 1979, I was asked by one of my colleagues if I would like to accompany him on a trip to Boston to attend the Annual Conference meetings of the Eastern Economic Association. I decided to take this trip for no other reason than to take a break from my daily work routines.
- While at the conference, I discovered that Allegheny College had an opening for a tenure track teaching position. On that same day, I was able to arrange an interview with them. Within a matter of ten days I had a campus interview and a job offer from Allegheny. The starting salary of this job was \$3000 less than what I was getting at the university of Rhode Island, but I was enticed by the promise of a career devoted to teaching.
- It was a real gamble on my part to leave a job for which I was well trained and doing quite well, for a new career path that felt exciting but uncertain. Luckily for me, it turned out to be a bet worthy of its risk. Teaching turned out to be my calling!

Upon reflection, my initial attraction to teaching stemmed not so much from my fascination with the 'mechanics' but the '**human relationship**' involved in teaching. In other words, not the **science** but the **art** of teaching.

I want to say a few words about the teaching philosophy and pedagogical insights I have developed over the course of my career, as these have been the heart of my “K” experience.

- From early on in my career, I adopted a teaching philosophy that emphasized relationship building with my students. **I believe to this day that an emotional link between a teacher and his students is critical to student learning.**
- I make this claim because learning is a very difficult task even when conditions are ideal. Think of all the emotions that are involved in mastering a hard subject like intermediate microeconomics or mathematical economics: curiosity, excitement, frustration, confusion, dread, delight, worry, and, hopefully, perseverance and joy. **A good teacher should have a strong ‘emotional’ vocabulary to maneuver through all those stages.**
- Here are **a few** examples of principles and practices that are my touchstones for cultivating emotional links with my students:
 1. **I engage with my students in casual conversation:** I do this mainly to dispel students’ image of a teacher as an inaccessible authority figure. A teacher can be respected without being feared. When a teacher manages to do this, the upshot is a **positive** learning environment. **Students give more attention to what is being taught by teachers who earn their respect without intimidation.**
 2. **I share my passion:** I make no attempt to hide my genuine **passion** for the subject matter I teach. From my experience, I found passion is contagious. It arouses student *curiosity* – a key

ingredient in students' interest in learning. We should never underestimate the power of a teacher to inspire learning.

3. I challenge students; but balance this gesture with support:

Challenge reminds students that learning is a difficult task and it requires discipline, attention to details, hard work, and perseverance. However, challenge alone can be harmful if it is not accompanied with the right amount of support. In general, **challenge + support contributes to students' Intellectual growth [i.e., enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills]**. This positive learning outcome, however, cannot be attained in the absence of good working relationships between students and their teacher.

Although I have built my career as a classroom teacher, it is also important to point out that teaching have both helped and guided me to develop my scholarly endeavors in many ways. Over the years, I had opportunities to teach and engage in collaborative research projects for a full academic year in three different countries; namely, Japan, Zimbabwe, and Botswana.

It was also because of my experience of teaching in two small liberal arts colleges that I came to recognize the value of interdisciplinary studies; especially in the field of environmental economics. I dare myself to teach Ecology and ended writing a textbook that made a formal attempt to integrate ecology and economics—the first of its kind. Here is what one anonymous reviewer has to say about my book: ***“A text that boldly refuses to put up barriers between disciplines and takes a holistic approach to vital environmental issues.”***

I should also add that through my book I have been able to establish connection with many teacher/scholars around the world. To cite just one example, three years ago I received an email from a teacher in France that read this way:

“Just a short mail to thank you for your book Principles of Environmental Economics that I acquired a couple years ago. I am a professor of Strategic Management at our business school but, have a PhD in Ecological Economics from the London School of Economics. Your book is complete, very well written and very clear about “pre-analytic vision”, in short, truly scientific. It’s just a pleasure to open it, as I have just been doing again in order to help a colleague with some economic relationships of pollution, i.e., the difference between pollution prevention and pollution control. Thank you very much.” Bey Christoph. KEDGE Business School in Talence, France.

Let me end my remarks today with the following expressions of Gratitude:

1. K-College

- For offering me an intimate and ideal environment for teaching – small class size and continuous supply of ‘wonderful’ students to make my type of teaching **flourish**.
- For its faculty, administrative and support staff members who are singularly committed to the cooperative efforts needed to create an environment conducive to student learning.

2. To my students: who sustained my enthusiasm for teaching and challenged as well as encouraged me to engage in other scholarly pursuits. I am eternally indebted to them.

3. **To My Posse Kids:** my experience of being a mentor for Posse Group III is unlike my other experience at K. I just want to thank ‘my posse kids’ for putting their trust in me; and, most importantly, for educating me about the scope, depth, variation, and prevalence of **social injustice** in America. Their goals and dreams in life also taught me to remain hopeful about the future even in the face of adversity.

4. **Colleagues and Personal Friends**

- To professors Phil Thomas and Fred Strobel: for their enthusiastic support, counseling, and constant positive feedback they provided me during my first three years at K – the pre-tenure era. Sadly, Fred passed away three years ago, but Phil remains a dear family friend to this day.
- To my current departmental colleagues: Thank you for the ‘respect’ and cooperation you have given me when I was serving as the Chair of the Department for a total of seventeen years. As I leave this place, I can firmly attest that your focus on student learning is legendary. My parting advice to you will be very simple. Carry on the legacy of the work we have been doing as a team over the past ten years to create a highly integrated economic and business program within the traditional boundaries of a liberal arts education.
- To Paul Olexia: During my first year at K, I went to Paul’s office to ask him if he would be willing to partner with me to initiate an environmental studies program at K. To make a long story short,

Paul and I immediately agreed to work together to propose a concentration in environmental studies to the faculty. The concentration was approved during the fall quarter of 1988. I worked with Paul as the co-Director of this program until his retirement in 2001.

Ever since, Paul has been my colleague, mentor (faculty advocate for both my tenure and promotion to full professor), my teacher, big brother, and beloved family friend. Paul: I sorely miss our weekly coffee meeting!

- To Professor Romeo Phillips: Dr. Phillips, you always found so many ways to lift my spirit; and tried to assure me that K is a safe place for me to work. I still don't know what I have done to deserve the attention that you have given me so generously during my entire tenure at K. I just simply say thank you very much for your support, kindness, and for always making me feel special; like the yearly phone call I get to wish me a happy birthday.

5. To My Family:

- To My Daughters –Sophia and Aida have been the sources of tremendous pride to both Fumie and I for what they became both as citizens of their community/country and for what they continue to accomplish in their chosen professions. We also recently found out, thanks to our two grandsons (Kenji and Kai), how easy we had it in raising our two daughters.
- Fumie, my wife. Where should I start! For the past 45+ years, I have done nothing that I consider to be worthwhile without

significant contributions from Fumie. She has been my right hand, most reliable life partner, and the workhorse of the family. Furthermore, she handsomely contributed to the income of the family working at Merrill Lynch as a financial analyst for 30 years. Fumie's love and devotion to her family is simply extraordinary. My daughters and I have been the sole beneficiary of her generosity.