

Forget Massey: Think About The Future and Roy

I was in a bar called the Plano Pumphouse, just outside Dallas, havin' a beer, when these two gigantic rednecks named Roy and Buddy began arguing about the presidential race. Now this was some time ago so they could have been arguing about Clinton and Dole or Clinton and Bush. I don't remember and I don't care. For that matter they could have been arguing about Truman and Dewey; who knows. All I know is that I'd finished my beer and was about to get another one when an ashtray hit me in the face.

Stunned, I jumped off my stool in time to catch Roy falling back into my arms. He regained his balance and pushed me into this older woman who had been on her stool since the Lincoln-Douglas debate and I might have enjoyed having a conversation with her but there wasn't time because Buddy pulled a gun and shot Roy in the right testicle. It might have been better if he'd killed him. Well, the Dallas police came fairly quickly and they put Roy and his single functioning testicle in an ambulance and Buddy in a squad car and drove off. I still remember Roy and Buddy yelling at each other as they drove away. My only question was "Why?" I mean, what could possibly be so earth-shaking about a presidential election that could make a man shoot another man in the testicle?

I was reminded of this incident in Dallas the other day in a faculty meeting when our department head made what was supposed to be an earth-shaking announcement--the message brought to us from the Reverend Massey Starbuck that the university was going to be reorganized on the corporate TQM model. "Consumer-based education," my department head said. "That's what the future is folks." Everyone was so upset, and I kept thinking, I'm gonna have to walk around campus banging a drum. But when he asked for comments, the only thing I could think of was what my daughter says to me all the time--"COOL!"

Let the folks in the White House have this new project. Tell them to take charge and go for it. Control is an illusion. They think they have it and we don't want it. But real power is found in the most unlikely places. For example, the guy with the yellow line-painting machine; now he has power. He could make all the administrator parking spaces into little boxes. That way if they were here when he did it, they could never leave. Or, when they arrived the next morning they would have to airlift their cars to park. "COOL!" The lady who brings the mail has power, mostly because she doesn't have to obey the yellow lines. And teachers have power. They can make things better. Teachers excited by their craft, their subject matter, and their students--that's where real power lies.

Of course, we have our own Plano Pumphouse; it's called the Faculty Senate and it accomplishes about as much. Those of you who have been around here for awhile know what all of those Senate committees, subcommittees, councils, and deliberations add up to and how long they take to add up to nothing. The Senate's work reminds me of the 106 years it took for the university to switch to the Marriott corporation for our food service. Boy are things different now. I mean we all notice the students running around campus freaking out about how good the green beans are. Gimme a break. From all that I can tell the only difference is that now the white truck that drives from cafeteria to cafeteria has "Marriott" painted on it. Maybe the food is supposed to taste better because we feel safer under the protection of some corporate dictator. Switching to Marriott took 106 years and 3115 committees, which met an unprecedented 62,374 times (this is still a school record), and Lincoln won the debate during the process. Today nobody can tell the difference. Oh yeah, and now you can get a taco.

Back to the future. This project could take the administration centuries to bring about. They'll be busy. We'll be teaching and the golf courses will be less crowded. We already know that real change takes place in the classroom, not on the stupid "Web." Be careful that you don't get sucked into the "Great Plano Pumphouse Debate" by spending all of your time e-mailing some Norwegian historian or suffering from Massey-steria. Go to the library for god's sake. Pick out a book, read it, and tell your class about it.

Incidentally, the whole concept of having one's own Web page is the dumbest thing I ever heard of. Who gives a crap? But don't tell the administrators this! Cheer for Massey. Say "COOL!" a lot and help the Senate form committees, lots of them. We need committees with really long names so they can do cool things with the initials. In fact, we should encourage them to try and break the food service record for committees. We could put a new number on the clock tower each time a new committee is formed and start a countdown (finally something we can do with the clock tower). "Who me? I am the new chair of the TCTSTCDTNNOTCT!" (The Committee To Select The Color Of The Next Number On The Clock Tower). "Cool!" all the administrators will say. They will begin to flood each other's computers with E-mail, work weekends, stay up late, become fans of the Shopping Channel, make long distance phone calls, and get high blood-pressure. When all is said and done there will be two new courses on the books, both taught by the historian from Norway, twelve new computers with 10,000 megabytes of RAM, new stationery, and a couple of articles in the "Neighbors" section of the Asheville Citizen. Who cares? Just do something useful in the classroom. If a student is working with a computer, COOL! We'll still have to be there to answer questions. We must not get sucked into another Plano Pumphouse Debate over inflated "business speak" about "consumers, products, clients, or productivity." Nothing will change. Let the administrators have their fun. Meetings is what they DO!

Of course, in the next millennium what eventually appears to some as revolutionary changes will occasion victory parties in the White House where new administrators will arrive and park their spaceships over the Sacred Car Mounds, where all the cars that were airlifted in centuries ago were parked and never moved. They will move along the Disney-like monorail to the inside of the Administration Building, marveling at Caveman Cobb's baseball glove, and be served a slice of roast beef, mashed potatoes, and those green beans. Poor long dead and buried Roy will be in his coffin, sans testicle. Lincoln, Truman (not Dewey), and Clinton will still have won and

we will have had the pleasure of teaching young Roys and Buddys, with their backwards ballcaps and spit cups, that a colon is not what their grandmas died of.

Technology is not a panacea. It won't solve any educational problems. Teaching and learning will always be about human contact, the relationship between teachers and students. Period. There is no revolution coming. But if the administrators think so, don't panic. Let them do what they do. Let them form their committees. Don't confuse this message with apathy. I can hear you saying things like, "If we don't show up and serve on these new committees we won't have a voice; we will lose control." You didn't read carefully. Control is an illusion. Just teach your classes best you can and say "COOL!"

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