

A THOUGHT-PIECE: THANKS FOR THE F

RONALD C. THOMAS

Moving into a new office can be a melancholy activity, even if the new office is going to be larger with new furniture. In gaining a promotion and reorganising a department, I also gained some new square footage. This would allow me to consolidate a lot of people and functions that were already working together under one roof, plus have some room to grow. The downside was the necessary evil of packing and unpacking.

Growing up in a military family, I had grown accustomed to the process, having changed schools thirteen times in eleven years. I didn't say I liked the process, especially always being 'the new kid', but at least I knew the mechanics of getting a household from here to there. I had always been responsible for my own room so I figured to do the same for this office move. Of course, I was also responsible for everyone in the department so I spent the weekdays making sure that they had all the boxes and assistance they needed and that they knew where their things were going to go in the new work area. I would come in on Saturday to take care of my stuff.

After 30 years in higher education, that can be quite a mountain of stuff because you never know what you might need again. As a young instructor without any rank at all, when a textbook rep says you can have a free examination copy of a book in your field, it's like getting your first hit of crack for free out behind the gym. Thirty years later, insulated against anything but nuclear fallout by walls of examination copies, remainders, overstocks, and previous editions, one thought comes to mind: there must be more empty boxes around the central copier. A rough conversion table took shape in my mind where one shelf of books equals one copier paper box.

Eventually, the back that served me so well through two unremarkable seasons of college tennis, back when I was young and indestructible, yielded to the weight of my non-union labours and a collection of old mass communication textbooks that still describe only three major television networks. This would be a good time to take a break and figure out all the handles on that new desk chair. As long as I'm sitting here, I can use this time to go through my desk drawers and maybe throw a few things out.

Starting with the ubiquitous junk drawer, not exactly a clone of the one in my kitchen, I drag my wastebasket nearby so that discarded items

can use the Acapulco cliff diving method of self-disposal. I reach a hand deep into the back of the drawer, intending to pull the contents forward for inspection, but I recoil suddenly. This is not in clichéd horror but in real pain as a box of push pins has come open and porcupined my hand in defense of its fellow office supplies. Taking more care this time, I sift through the many stick pens imprinted with hotel names (I never have placed an order for pens in my career, come to think of it) and conference name badges that I actually discard until I come to a simple white envelope.

I open the flap and there is a simple ‘Thank you’ card inside with a note that says:

Dear Prof. Thomas,

You probably don’t even know it but you saved my life! I’ll never forget you.

Then I remember the student who I won’t name here, but I won’t forget her either. It was at a previous university and I was teaching a section of one of my favourite courses, a senior-level class in communication theory. While that could easily sound dry, to spend an entire term slogging through a review of research literature, key authors, their methodologies and their conclusions, I felt we made it practical by finding everyday use of each theory we covered.

The basic organisation of the course was pretty straightforward: divide the material into units, cover it, and test on it, and produce a serviceable term paper. In addition to the face-to-face class meetings, I used an online discussion board to supplement participation and review for the exams. It wasn’t exactly novel in its approach and its *Flintstones*-level use of technology hardly compared to what I oversee today.

Perhaps my biggest contribution to my students’ learning was that I made their term paper take all term long to do. I had seen enough last-minute, slap-dash papers, thank you very much. The first wave of internet-assembled cut-and-paste term papers were also coming in at that time. I knew with Barney Fife certainty that I needed to nip it in the bud.

At the first class meeting, after saying ‘here endeth the Syllabus’, I began a discussion of what research really was and how that related to our class. We would be discussing these major authors and their research, how they framed their questions, what they hoped to answer, and what conclusions they drew. Therefore, in their term papers, we would do something similar. Stunned silence. Bring up the special effects of crickets in the background.

By the end of week one, I required them to post on the class website the communications phenomenon they wanted to examine. (Just between you and me and the readership of this publication, I couldn't have cared less if they wanted to examine *American Idol*, internet dating, or how frequently President Bush used contractions.) I would then post a suggested communication theory from the text that would provide a good lens for studying that subject. This might require them to read ahead. More silence.

By week two, I required a thesis statement. By week three, a working outline and by week four, a handful of preliminary sources were submitted. If you have used such an approach yourself, you know that it is also a fine plagiarism prevention device. This is a paper the student can't just go and buy or copy 5,000 words on Howard Cosell because this topic didn't exist in this shape until this moment in time.

It also supported a long-standing belief I have had about my worth as an instructor. I figure that my A students will excel in spite of me and my F students will fail no matter what I do. That's not predestination but I have noticed that my top students come to office hours for extra help that they don't need. The converse is equally true. However, I find I really earn my living helping D students struggle up to a C or C students making that breakthrough to a B. There's my value added, where I will teach them within an inch of their lives if they'll try to learn it.

All of which brings me round to the card in my desk that I'll never throw away. The student in question had always been a solid performer on the examinations, made cogent comments in class and was active online. It's easy to spot those students who can clarify a point on the board so that other readers get it right (and so that I don't have to inject myself to correct an error in fact prior to an exam date) and she had that ability.

When it comes to grading term papers, I try to handle it the same way as when I am doing peer reviews for a journal. I explained this process to my students and how important it was in the publication of research such as we were studying in this course. Since this was a course that would be a way-station to graduate school for many of them, I wanted to get them thinking about that kind of writing and review. To that end, I required their names at the end, rather than the beginning, to afford me a bit of blindness in my reading.

Most of the term papers I read were fine efforts, worthy of university seniors, and a few would have been good grad school papers. A few had problems and there was one that was no more a term paper than a crossword puzzle is a sonnet. It had a lot of words and punctuation marks in it but otherwise it was a weaving path that led nowhere with no

citations or documentation of any kind. Maybe not all who wander are lost but, by the end of this stack of sheets of paper, I wasn't clear on my own assignment anymore. It got a score of '0, see me after class', and I kept moving through the pile of submissions.

The last class meeting was scheduled for course evaluations and 'culminating discussion'. It was a chance for me to give back unclaimed papers and have a talk with the class about how they might apply what they have learned in future classes or in life before giving the room over to a student proctor for the evaluation process. There are always a few unclaimed papers so I thought nothing of carrying them back with me to the office.

A week later, after final grades had been posted online, in advance of paper reports going out in the mail, I received a frantic telephone call. Through the tears, sniffles and gasps, I could make out that this was the student who had made a hash of her paper but was solid otherwise, solid but not stellar enough to overcome the paper. Due to the way I had weighted the course, the paper had given her an overall F, even with a B-C average on the tests. My grading schema, as I had explained from the first night, emphasised showing me what you can do with the information, not just being able to recite the information back to me.

She wanted to come see me to find out what could be done about her paper after I explained how her final grade was calculated. I said that it would be unfair to let her redo the paper to bring her grade up unless I offered the same opportunity to everyone in the class. Even though the campus scouting report on me was 'tough but fair' my enrollment had increased to over 50 students in that section. That was more rework than I was willing to risk. I suggested that she might retake the course in a future term, with me or another instructor, and the catalogue forgiveness policy would substitute the new grade for the old.

At her emotional ebb tide, she revealed to me why this was such a critical issue and why my suggested solution was impossible. She was a graduating senior, had accepted an out-of-town job that required the bachelor's degree in hand, and she had already moved out of the dorms and leased an apartment in the new city. She was caught between Scylla and Charybdis, a rock and a hard place, the devil and the deep blue sea, me and my conscience.

Grasping for straws and stalling for time, I asked her why, if she knew this was her ticket out, had she done such an awful job on her term paper. She said she had never done one before and no idea where to start or what to do. How could she have become a senior at a major university and never had a research paper assignment until she ran into me? Between dual enrolment, credit-by-exam, and other faculty who

apparently didn't want to teach or grade research writing, it just hadn't happened. Now, here I was at Checkpoint Charlie with an MLA style guide instead of an M-16. If only she had come to office hours...

'Let me check with one of our advisors and call you back in half an hour', I said, forming what might be a bad idea. Not so skilled with legacy mainframe systems, I asked one of our advising team to pull the student's transcript. With a little Eighth Grade arithmetic, I had my solution.

I told the student that if she would come to office hours and give me a 50-minute period, I would go over her paper and teach her the rudiments that no one had previously done. Also, I would give her the tools for the future. Someday her new employer might want her to have an MBA to get a promotion and she'll need these skills. If she'll let me teach her the lesson she should have received, I'll re-score her paper to a 50 instead of 0. It's still an F but now she'll get a D for my class and have a GPA that satisfies the graduation requirements.

We spent more than the allotted time and she took lots of notes. I could tell that she understood the general idea and some of the details. The main things to me were that I still got my teachable moment and I still flunked the paper that she submitted. Justice was done to her and to her classmates. I didn't give away the university's degree; I made her come back and do an academic penance.

When I got that card, I knew that would be something I would carry from office to office for the rest of my career to remind me of my lesson too.