

What made you change your mind?

After three-and-a-half years, I came back to school determined to follow my interests and not worry about a job. That was one of the best decisions I've ever made. By luck, I ended up in one of Conrad Discont's literature classes at Fresno City College. Watching him transform literature into something vibrant and alive, I knew I wanted to do the same thing. My decision was reinforced when I transferred to Fresno State and began taking classes in the English department. There I was fortunate enough to take classes from people like Roger Chittick, Lillian Faderman, and others — some of the finest teachers I've ever had.

So when you returned to school, you went straight through until you received your Ph.D.?

Yes. But it took me awhile. I was always juggling conflicting demands on my time. As an undergraduate, I worked at several jobs — weekends and summers as a waitress in Yosemite, weekdays at a fast food restaurant in Fresno, and one summer as a mental health aide for Valley Medical Center. Except for my first-year fellowship at Iowa, I taught part time while I was working on my M.A. and Ph.D. Those early years of teaching were exciting, but I never got much sleep. I often spent half the evening writing my own papers and then stayed up until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. reading student papers.

Students consistently comment on how helpful you are on both a personal and professional level. Do you think it is easier for you to relate to students because you can remember the pressures of going to school and balancing other responsibilities?

I can remember my life as a student very well. I also listen to what my students tell me about the pressures they are under. Student life can be fun, but it's not easy. Some people stereotype students as irresponsible — kids more interested in partying than books. There are people like that. But most of my students have jobs as well as full school schedules; many have families and quite a few commute from

other towns in the valley. I have a special interest in reentry students. They have so much to offer in terms of life experience and mature insights. They may lack a degree of confidence at first, but they almost always do well because they are highly motivated.

Most of the students in your composition classes are non-majors. How do you motivate them?

I try to make them feel comfortable about the class, about talking to each other, about the idea of writing. I try to show them that the ability to use language well is a source of power in our society. I also stress the intrinsic value of writing as discovery, using writing to learn about oneself and others. When students become engaged in this process, when they begin to write for themselves, not just for a grade, they often exceed my expectations. I remember one student, an accountancy major, who thought English Composition was going to ruin her semester. She ended up publishing two of the papers she wrote for class and enrolling in the English Internship Program the next semester. So it's not just a question of being an English major or not. It has more to do with the desire to communicate clearly no matter what field one is in.

Do you approach a literature class any differently?

In all my classes, I encourage students to actively participate in what they read and write. I like to stir up controversy, to elicit conflicting points of view. I probably do more of that in a literature class because I want students to see the richness and multiple possibilities inherent in any work of art. I want them to go beneath the surface and grapple with unanswerable questions. Literature is not a list of facts that can be transmitted in fifty minute intervals three times a week. The process of understanding literature is a dynamic one that goes beyond the classroom and beyond me as a teacher. I feel I am succeeding when my class has already begun the discussion before I arrive, or when we continue talking for a half hour in the hall after the class is over.

Do you have any advice for students majoring in English?

An English degree is both personally rewarding and practical. Teaching is an obvious career choice. But a degree in English can also be a valuable asset for students going into law, business, public relations, counseling, or technical writing. The English Internship Program provides an excellent opportunity for practical experience. And the skills you learn as an English major — analysis, critical thinking, and clear writing — are in demand everywhere.

Do you ever hear from former students?

I keep in touch with quite a number of my former students. They drop by my office to let me know how their other classes are going, or how they're doing after they graduate. Some have left the area, but I get letters, and occasional phone calls from all over the United States and other parts of the world — Belgium, Africa, Japan. Many students become friends and we continue conversations begun long ago in class. Watching them grow and change over the years is one of the most rewarding aspects of this profession.