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Discovering Teaching and Learning: Advance Personalize Learning

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Discovering Teaching and Learning

Advance Personalized Learning

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This Portfolio is submitted in partial fulfillment of the Olin Grand Challenge Scholars Program.

Abstract.

In my GCSP portfolio, I reflect upon the connections between teaching (my lifelong calling) and my major occupations at Olin College. I describe how five roughly chronological experiences – a year-long sabbatical from my engineering degree, an inspirational education course, a series of teaching opportunities, my position as a “Resident Resource”, and numerous management positions in community organizations at Olin – correspond to five functions I believe are vital facets of an effective teacher – role model, guide, educator, mentor, and leader.

For each one, I clarify my motivations and describe elements of my methodology in order to construct a set of intentions for my eventual teaching practice. The process of synthesizing this portfolio required a significant amount of introspection and self-analysis, which I understand in retrospect involved taking great strides along the path of self-awareness and personal growth. This is a journey that only grows more and more relevant with time.

This portfolio serves as a collection of my actions, beliefs, goals, and realizations prior to graduation. It is a comprehensive snapshot of my professional abilities and ambitions in my early twenties.

All my life, people would tell me that I would be a great teacher, but I only started hearing them during my Junior year of college. Before then, I never actually envisioned myself taking on the role. I never thought about how happy it would make me to follow that path. I didn't realize how well my inclinations for personal development and the requirements for teaching aligned. Teaching was an abstract concept, not a career path! I would just take the remark as a compliment and move on. It made me happy to teach, and I was proud to be recognized for my work. But I didn't really listen to the words. I would be a great teacher. I didn't realize it before, but over time and through powerful experiences, I opened my eyes. It took a year-long sabbatical from my engineering degree, an inspirational education course, a series of teaching opportunities, my position as an R2, and leadership roles in numerous community organizations at Olin for me to see: I am able to be a role model, a guide, an educator, a mentor, and a leader – all of which, I believe, are key facets of an effective teacher. And after all of these experiences, I now know why I want to teach.

I was in Dresden when the enormity of my decision to travel finally sunk in. I was one month into what would become a 15-month voyage through 21 countries and 4 continents. I had put my studies on hold after two grueling years of trying to discover which kind of engineering appealed to me most. None of the majors initially resonated with me, so I decided I would just fulfill them all at once, and make my decision later. I had been filling my semesters with so many credits during my search that I had the option of earning my Olin degree in just 3 years, total. I had been taking so many credits that I didn't really have time to think about that decision. I didn't have time to think about any of my decisions, which is why it took me a month of traveling through southeast Europe to really realize that I had decided not to return to college for over a year. At that point, daunted by the prospect of my journey, eager to take it, and free to finally think, I saw the world of possibilities in front of me. I saw myself on the cusp of a breakthrough in my decision-making ability: I realized then that I could choose what to do. I could choose to do whatever I wanted. What's more, I realized I had the power to choose why I chose things: I was the one in charge of every step of my rational process. It seems obvious in retrospect, but it's a profound realization, when you're having it. And I started choosing

right away, making plans, making decisions, and identifying my motivations for those decisions. Now, I can't truthfully say that I got my process perfect on the first try. As a 19 year old on my own, I made careless mistakes (losing belongings, postponing flights), acted thoughtlessly (overstaying my welcome with friends), recklessly (hitch-hiking in Germany, sleeping on the streets of Paris, stretching the change in my pocket and the days on my visa in Barcelona), and even delinquently (breaking onto the roof of my apartment in Berlin, shoplifting souvenirs in Morocco, Copenhagen, and Buenos Aires). But they were my mistakes – I owned them. Since that trip, my moral pendulum has swung back to a much more mindful place. Instead of asking myself: "Can I?" I ask "Should I?" I've internalized the idea that to properly balance pros and cons, I have to take into account the feelings of everyone affected by my decisions – not just myself. And I've accepted that simply wanting things to be okay doesn't at all make them so. It was a long voyage of discovery, and certainly not one whose destinations I could have predicted at the end of Sophomore year. After my epiphany in Dresden, I was nervously eager to begin taking control of my life; I was no longer drowning in Engineering; I would do my utmost to absorb everything I could from the places I visited. And I did just that – both geographically and in responsibility. I learned about the world. I learned about myself. I grew full of experiences in those 15 months. I returned to Olin much wiser than I left it, ready to find a new and better way for myself.

I started applying my lessons immediately: 1. Make decisions that will lead to maximum happiness. 2. Make sure the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. 3. Stay out of engineering. I had plenty of freedom in my remaining semesters, so I decided to take non-technical and non-depth classes simply based on the teacher and the rave reviews. This is how I chose Zhenya Zastavker's Teaching and Learning course, where everything finally clicked for me. I finally began to envision myself as a teacher. My years of tutoring and coaching suddenly aligned. I began to realize where my life had always been heading. In this class, I discovered different learning styles, epistemologies, pedagogies, and prejudices. I read heaps of papers that gave me context for, and insight into, much of my learning to date. As I learned, I saw. Zhenya brought the lessons to life, deliberately and unambiguously modeling the behaviours she was

teaching. And as I saw, I taught. My final deliverable for the class was to teach a lesson of my own creation to a small class of high school students. Just as Zhenya wove the examples from our engineering courses through her lessons, using the technical language that we all shared in her metaphors, I integrated her lessons on student motivation into my lesson (about applying dimensional analysis) which I gave to two groups at Westwood High School. I planned to guide the students through the process of understanding both the problem and the solution. I hoped to give them the tools to do the work rather than simply lecture at them - a key distinction I'd noted in Zhenya's class. I tried to apply the theoretical lessons and the insights from my previous teaching experiences to help the students to make connections and leaps on their own. In the end, I must have made a good impression on their teacher, Mark Holthouse, because he later invited me to return to Westwood to see if I wanted to work there after I graduate!

The news came over winter break, before my final semester at Olin. Zhenya wrote me a brief email with the subject: "I think I have a job for you for next year..." We soon met, and I learned that Mark wanted me to spend as long as I wanted to observing his classes, and (once I got comfortable enough) to teach a couple of them as well! With Zhenya pulling for me at Olin, I started going to Westwood two mornings a week for the entirety of my final semester. At first, I observed Mark's style, interpreted his decisions, and discussed them with him during breaks. I grew familiar with the flow of his Physical Science classroom, and began think about how I would deliver the content to his students. After a few weeks, I asked for a pair of lessons. I adapted his materials, adopted his style and... I flubbed it! I realized later that the lecture notes I'd prepared weren't as helpful as they needed to be, that I'd set the difficulty level too high, and that I had planned the lesson for five people instead of twenty. I went through the process again, applying my new insights. I recalibrated. I re-evaluated. The second lesson I gave went much better. It was actually quite good! And then I tweaked it for another class the following week! The whole semester, I continued to observe Mark and to teach at Westwood, paving my way for a long term opportunity at the school. I know now why he chose to invite me to his class, and I know why I chose to go: I am good at learning how to be

a better educator – interpreting and applying insights about the decisions of others and my own. That’s something I’d be glad to do for the rest of my life!

Actually, as far as continual improvement goes, nothing characterizes my progress better than my role as an R2 at Olin. I applied, as I had for my Sophomore and Junior years, because I wanted to have a positive impact on the student body. I knew that, if I were selected, I could make a big difference for the incoming First Years and the community as a whole. After two failed attempts, I was finally able to justify to the committee why I was ready for the job. As a rising Senior, I explained, I had years of personal growth to work from. I explained that, unlike previous years, I finally ‘got it’. It makes me laugh to think about that application, a year later, because between getting the job and the first days of work, at Orientation, I made self-awareness a priority, and gained an entirely new perspective on life. And over the course of the year, I’ve added still more layers to the pile. Now, all I know now is that I know nothing – and I’m not even certain of that! Still, I knew enough to land the job, to learn from it, and to use it to mentor others. During training, before classes, I developed the skills I needed to fulfill my mission to help people in distress. I explicitly learned how to listen actively, react in a supportive manner, and adapt my own mindset to be as helpful as possible. One evening before the rest of the school arrived, the entire First Year class visited each R2 in their room in groups of six to ten. I knew this was an opportunity not to be missed. I described the Impostor Syndrome to every student in the class. I explained that it’s normal to feel like you aren’t good enough or smart enough, especially at a place like Olin. I told them that it’s extremely common here, that virtually everyone here suffers from it, and that they should never forget that they are capable of great things. Much later, one candidate for next year’s R2 team (a First Year), asked me to give her my feedback on her application. My heart rose as I read about how knowledge of the Imposter Syndrome had helped her navigate her first year at Olin, and about her intentions to reach out to the class of 2018 about it during their Orientation weekend! Now that she has gotten the job, I hope that she will follow through on her stated goals. I hope she will do much more, in fact. I hope she will look to me for guidance not only on how to act, but also on

how to always keep maturing. I know that I will – my past and my doubts are more opportunities for growth.

Personal growth is an important theme for me, but so is success, and contributing to my community. I combine these pursuits by investing myself in a few leadership roles in the Olin – SAC, Build Day, and the Design Challenge (to name a few). I delegate, I assist, I provide information, and context. I keep an eye on the goals of the organization, another eye on the team's health, and another eye on opportunities for individuals to develop. In my tenure at Olin, I have learned to do this well. And since I spend most of my time here managing large groups of people, I reach a lot of people this way. As the SAC chair, I match planners and events so that we successfully fill the social calendar to the satisfaction of the Student body. I also make sure that my organizers develop the skills and knowledge base to tackle ever-greater challenges. As the Build Day project manager, I keep the team on track to realize our vision. My job is to solidify last year's last-minute collection of events and initiatives into a methodical, values-driven process, a part of the Olin ecosystem. As the Design Challenge coordinator (this year marking my fourth in the position), I recognize and communicate the patterns of an effective Candidates' Weekend. I could explain, in the very first meeting, exactly where our energy would go, how long we should give ourselves to achieve each step of the process, and how to go about solving the very open problem before us. In each of these roles, I applied my experience, creativity, and foresight to exciting and novel challenges! It's been a pleasure bringing such energy to Olin. But as much as I love to feel responsible for making things happen myself, this year, my focus has been on transitioning leadership to others before I graduate. There are a handful of First Years who are on every team I lead! I initially thought of them as my minions, but that didn't feel particularly empowering. Now I refer to them as my successors. I try to enable them to feel confident in their abilities. I've been pushing my team members to grow beyond their roles. As we approach commencement, I find myself reassuring colleagues that they will manage fine without me: I may be good at what I do, but so are they. I know that they are capable and keen, and that they have the experience necessary to do a great job. I am more than confident that they will rise to the challenge.

In my last few years at Olin, I learned to be a role model, a guide, an educator, a mentor, and a leader. I gained the ability to make and rationalize decisions, to piece together the direction of my life, to evaluate my choices and improve on them, to seek self-awareness and never claim to have achieved it, and to manage teams while setting up constructive environments for them to learn. I have chosen to follow my passions, to benefit my community, and to developing a more thorough understanding of myself as I go. I have committed myself to the path of teaching because, to me, doing what I love, striving to better the lives of those around me, and seeking self-discovery all converge on one thing: Teaching. Teaching is my calling, and I'm proud to say that I'm listening to it.