REPORTING HOME FROM THREE ETHICS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM CONFERENCES

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Academic conference attendees, often reinvigorated, bring ideas back to their campuses and into their academic work in different ways. This report will explore the author’s evolved method for bringing ideas from the last three national conferences of the Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum (SEAC) back to his community college, one that is in an economically hard hit area of the country. The report also serves as an informal description of the liveliness and importance of SEAC conferences. What started out as an account of one SEAC conference, written by the author in a local newspaper column, evolved into an interesting attempt to link the energy found in three successive conferences to the local region and particularly to its community college students.

THE ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST SEAC CONFERENCE ATTENDED BY THE AUTHOR

One month before my first SEAC conference (at Oregon State University in October, 2004) I began writing a weekly column, “Reflection and Change,” in the Mid-Valley Town Crier in Weslaco, in the very south part of Texas. On the plane back from Oregon, I decided to report the conference for my column, and that began the process that is the topic of this paper. It will be helpful for the readers to have a summary of that first column, (October 20, 2004). (Significant quoted passages are presented, with eager permission from the Town Crier’s publisher, so that the reader can judge the level of discourse and tone employed. It was not written for an academic audience.)

Perks for college teachers are few, but occasionally we dress up and receive money to attend a significant conference in our
field. And occasionally, the conference is rewarding. (Sometimes they are not helpful, of course, and seem to be dominated by academic careerists padding their resumes.) I just returned from a good one.

It was the annual Ethics Across the Curriculum Conference (SEAC), held this year [2004] at Oregon State University and having as this year’s theme, “ethics in institutions.”

I particularly enjoyed three sessions there: one led by a young administrator in a non-profit health care facility in San Francisco, one by a journalism professor, and one by me.

The rest of the column reported loosely those three favorite sessions. The first report concerned the non-profit health care facilities; someone mentioned one health care institution, which, taking sensible care for the bottom line, decided to lop off one of its least profitable sub-services. But they simply “forgot” to take into account that there were people dependant on that unprofitable service. This reminded me, I told readers of my column, of when I used to teach at a college next to a large Catholic hospital.

It [the hospital] had been founded a hundred years ago by a handful of dedicated, nearly starving nuns. A century later it had too much fancy marble for my taste, fancy furnishings in its lobby, a campaign to keep the union out, no regard for the day care needs of the employees with children – a situation they could have remedied with minimal cost – and a horrible gap in pay between the housekeeping/kitchen staff level and the guru administrator/doctor level. It even developed a slow, bureaucratic emergency room, and a relentless “make-‘em-pay” attitude toward debtors.

[However tempting it used to be for people like me who dealt with that hospital,] finger-pointing at the “bad people” who hijacked the institution away from the vision of the loving nuns, was not a very productive approach. The evolving corporate culture of the entity has to be studied. That was an important message in our conference.

The column then briefly described a second conference presentation emphasizing corporate culture, conducted by a journalism professor, Dr. Wendy Wyatt-Barger. She reported a self-study that the New York Times conducted after it found that some of its journalists were virtual conduits of misinformation about “weapons of mass destruction” in the
build-up to the current Iraq war. Everyone in the room knew that Judith Miller, since dismissed by the Times, was the real subject of discussion. Although some of the questions from the floor suggested that the self-study was a way for the Times to “cover” itself and protect its prominent reporter, the speaker disagreed. Miller would probably lose her job, but the Times refused to leave it at that and pushed for the institutional review, a “cultural study” of how the unprofessional activity emerged. My column continued:

Their self-study was insightful. A climate change had emerged in the newsrooms since 9/11 notably. The study identified a tendency to write only for the front page, to get the big stories out while forgetting the hard work of follow-up stories, and finally coddling of sources, even after it was obvious they were lying. The newsroom had not realized the degree to which they had disregarded standard journalistic judgment and reserve because it was a “non-standard” (emergency) time. They had scooped up little excuses for themselves as they went along, creating an ethical hole.

Because my column only allows 775 words, I had little space left for my own presentation. I briefly explained how police department leaders often neglect the “cultural” questions; they enjoy holding press conferences saying they have found a “bad apple” in the department. This seems to validate the department as doing its job – “See, we even get the bad guys when they are our own” – but leaders fail to examine the evolved “culture” of the department, the “barrel” where the “apple” went bad. The column, written on the plane coming home from the conference, concluded with some barbs:

[Police administrators] are afraid to look at the degenerated, general state of police culture, its internal humor (adolescent camaraderie) and its attitudes toward . . . “meddling” liberals . . .

That concludes a précis of the first column I wrote about the SEAC conferences. I quoted at length to share the “popularizing” tone of my column. The reportage was intended as informal; it was perhaps light weight by academic standards but not condescending. My conference report to Weslaco had a punchy popular tone and intended a gadfly’s sting. By veering off onto personal experiences, like my reaction to the Catholic hospital I once lived near, I attempted to bring some spirit of
conference discussion back to Weslaco. (On the hospital excursus, Rio Grande Valley readers would clearly recognize their hospitals as having similar symptoms to the one I mentioned.)

That column became the first of eight columns I wrote about the SEAC: Two on the 2004 conference held at Oregon State University; two on the 2005 conference at Florida’s Ringling School of Art and Design, two on the 2006 conference at Dartmouth, and two special columns preparing for the Dartmouth conference.

**South Texas College and the Poverty of the Local Area**

These conference reports were not tailored to an academic journal – they were not abstracts – but to the Mid-Valley Town Crier, which had recently offered me the weekly column. The office of the twice-weekly Town Crier is located a mile from my school, South Texas College, a two-year community college with campuses in three cities in the Rio Grande Valley. (The school recently changed its name from South Texas Community College, now offering one four-year degree, a Bachelors in Applied Technology.) My campus, in Weslaco, is a commuter campus of course, with about 5,000 students moving in and out of the parking lots. (There are about 17,000 students total on the three campuses.) We are all very proud of our school, and its progress, although it reflects the poverty of the area along the Rio Grande. Located in the poorest urban county in America, my campus has no gymnasium, no student health clinic, no campus plays, no traditional student-run school newspaper, no band, no school dances – it lacks many things the high schools have, and the students know it: Weslaco High School is across the street. Ninety percent of the students in my classes have Hispanic last names; very many are first generation college students. Because of the poverty, far too many are not “college ready” when they enter.

Many of the students have never traveled out of the Valley. This latter fact struck me two years ago. I quite frequently mentioned in class going up to San Antonio to visit my daughter, a philosophy major up there, four hours away. One student raised his hand and said that he had gone to San Antonio that weekend. “Oh,” I said, “why were you up there?” “I did it for myself,” he said. “I am twenty-one and have never been anywhere before.” The students all seemed interested, and he described taking a bus up there, looking around at things without a plan, and finding The Alamo.
STC’s faculty is solid and dedicated, but only 30% have Ph.D.s. And although I took my first philosophy class 42 years ago and once was in a Ph.D. program, I myself have settled for two masters degrees and came to the Valley five years ago after having taught intermittently in several other places; the other philosopher with an office on my campus does have a doctorate. The college did a national search recently for Vice-president of Instruction (our highest academic officer) and chose a fine, very competent person, but I was disappointed that STC chose a person whose administrative and teaching experience was at our own school and who did not have a doctorate . . . Again, I was pleased with the person chosen but had hoped a different signal would be sent.

Besides the poverty and provincialism locally, there is a virtual police state here on the Mexican border. As I repeat in my column, I have never seen so many police anywhere else I have lived: sheriffs and city police and constables; State Troopers giving tickets in the middle of towns; Border Patrol, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Besides the border crossings themselves, there are federal checkpoints on the roads about an hour north of the Valley. This is considered necessary because there is much traffic back and forth to Mexico, and many people working in the States do not have proper papers. Texas also has an intimidating reputation for fiery prosecutors and draconian sentences. Although New York and California together had only one execution in 2006, Texas executed someone every three weeks. Undermining a general camaraderie, this over-policing causes occasional tension between those who are not citizens and those Mexican Americans who have established citizenship. (Some of the latter appear overly patriotic to me.) There also seems to be some political and social timidity in the smaller towns because of a horrible history of discrimination in the Texas border region. There are four immigration detention facilities in the Rio Grande Valley – one, according to frequent demonstrators, is clearly in violation of international legal conventions – and there is a push to set up a provocative border wall between Mexico and the U.S. (Several of the faculty – including me – have “No Border Wall” stickers on their cars.)

The political left often speaks of a “militarization of the border” taking place. The National Guard now supplements the Border Patrol, and the local police are increasingly linked to it. Private contractors are beginning to get jobs in the growing border policing. A local organization which was founded to stop the detention centers calls itself the Coalition Against Immigrant Repression, and the term “repression” was chosen deliberately: since the mass mobilization in May 2006, when millions of
people were in the streets nationally calling for fair immigration policies, workplace raids and other anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric have seemed to increase.

**THE TOWN CRIER COLUMN IN ACTION AND INTERACTION**

With the economic disadvantages, the localism, and the timidity caused by “militarization,” my column in the twice weekly paper of Weslaco does cause some stir. I invariably attack the death penalty, the Iraq war, military recruiters targeting Mexican Americans, police misconduct, the Patriot Act, etc. Any oppositional organization locally knows my column will give them a plug. My students sometimes show up in class with one of the articles: “My dad liked this one.” Occasionally, a writing instructor copies one for class discussion.

The SEAC articles I wrote were particularly popular. Because I discussed the conference in the local paper, my conference report did not simply go back to the other philosophy teacher on campus. One fun interaction at the school has developed because I have presented a paper on police ethics at each of the three SEAC conferences. It seems, on campus, I am thought to be “anti-cop,” greatly because of my touted SEAC presentations on this issue. (“Those not praising cops, must be against them,” is the popular mentality.) Criminal Justice offers an associates degree on the campus and it is a popular program, second only to education; and, because of my reputation for clipping police misconduct articles and telling the students to know their rights and to shush up when arrested, our little philosophy club sometimes pretends that it is the competition to the award-winning C.J. club. Our club knows it cannot really compete, because the campus has only five philosophy majors while C.J. has hundreds, law enforcement employment sadly being one of too few options in the Valley. (I paraphrase in class Michael Moore’s quip that Flint, Michigan became so desperate for jobs that it hired half of the unemployed to arrest and lockup the other half.) Because of the lore of my column and competition between clubs, there is a humorous cautionary tale going around: If students drink and drive and start getting in trouble with the law, they could end up studying philosophy.

I began finding myself preparing my readers for the conference. Later I will show how I included them in writing my conference papers. Here are selections from the September 2005 issue . . . I was preparing to go to the October Sarasota conference. The first sentence from my column in the Town Crier Sept. 24, 2005: “Last year I attended the Annual
Ethics Across the Curriculum conference, and this year I am going again . . .”

I summarized my previous conference experience, stating how important it is to be in contact with others nationally who are experimenting with new material and approaches. You will see that I let the readers see me correct my views, let them into my anticipation of the conference and tried to give them a sense of being in on the planning.

Honestly, I find that I do get into little ruts [in my teaching and writing] and I did benefit from the conference. My paper described how “institutions” – the organizational habits, traditional values, concerns etc. – of police work shape individual officers. (Of course I am a philosophy teacher, no expert on police work. I have no inside knowledge, although I have gotten a few traffic tickets and my uncle was a cop. I only claim to be an interested outsider, interested in ethics, peeking into police department windows.)

Because other conference attendees were examining institutions, hospitals, newspapers like the *New York Times*, colleges and sales firms, I could put new light on police work.

Perhaps I had previously thought that institutional pressure on cops was more unique than it really is. But people working in newsrooms, hospitals, etc. are also “trained” through daily practice and interaction to obey unstated rules, rules protecting the team from outside snooping or from criticism about ethical lapses . . .

[Last year’s conference, with its institutional ethics theme, was so helpful] that I was geared up to attend this year. Hoping to write a follow-up piece on police institutions and ethics, I clicked on the Internet some months ago to find the requirements.

I was heartbroken: the theme for this year’s [2005; Sarasota, Florida] conference was “ethics and artistic expression.” How could I connect artistic expression with my current ethics work, concern with ethical lapses within police institutions?

Tired of me moping, a philosophy colleague offered a suggestion: write about how police look or should look at graffiti. I thought about it, quit moping, wrote a discussion paper in a jiffy, sent it off, and, opening my e-mail this week, discovered they had accepted it. I am going to go this year too. I don’t know what I will learn.
If you are interested, this is how I got my [graffiti] paper going. I asked three fellow profs to hand out a questionnaire: it asked students, without suggesting any options, what they would do if they saw a 13-year-old spray painting the side of a convenience store.

I had no interest in gathering social scientific data: I was just looking for threads to pull. Of 47 responses most answers were stock. They would tell the store manager, tell the police, or tell the store manager and the police. Only thirteen of the 47 reported they would say anything at all themselves to the youngster. This struck me as odd.

The questionnaire went out to college students, not residents of old folks homes who might predictably be frightened of the kid. Why did so few want to say anything to the kid? Physical fear? – Unlikely. The questionnaire did not portray the kid as menacing, carrying a knife, ranting, breaking windows, on drugs, etc. And I found that only two students of the 47 raised the issue of graffiti art or even tried to get into the head of the youngster.

The column concluded with some reference to other research I am doing on the matter and a quick look at the advertisements from one police department’s “community friendly” graffiti abatement program which portrayed graffiti as a sign of “outsiders” coming in. But what was most significant about the column was its dramatizing of the upcoming conference, including students in it, with three professors (from different disciplines) handing out the questionnaire – and it all was reported in the town paper. (I also reported my research on graffiti and police at two Valley churches.)

At Sarasota’s beautiful and creative Ringling School of Art and Design, the librarian set me up in a quiet computer space, and I wrote the column reporting the first day of the conference. The headline the Town Crier put on my column was “A Report from National Ethics Conference.”

SARASOTA, Fla. — If you are wondering why I have a Florida dateline on this column, you should be happy to hear that I am in Florida . . .

The column reported some of the first day’s events including a panel discussing the artwork of Roger Shinomura, who joined my table for lunch and who, I knew, would interest my readers. Although Shinomura
had begun his art work under the influence of Andy Warhol, an artist best known for painting Campbell’s soup cans, as his art matured, Shinomura began reaching into his immigrant background, when his family was held in racist detention camps during World War II:

At the conference we saw Shinomura's paintings of children behind barbed wire and paintings of old people wondering why they had immigrated here years before . . .

One painting was of an elderly person with a cane, wearing a traditional Japanese robe, trying to sneak around a huge painting of a red Campbell’s soup can. One of Shinomura’s themes is for young people to become artists, to “pull away from the common deceptions,” deceptions which linger in society because society encourages us to blend in with the background. Art allows us to question the blended background, question where we stand and what we are standing next to.

I received several favorable comments about the Shinomura reportage, there being interest in this region in immigrants admitting their experience of disappointment.

Another panel I reported included an amazing presentation by Dr. Andrew Gustafson, who discussed the nervous breakdown of the great ethicist, John Stuart Mill. Although Mill had become a disciplined, logical, responsible young adult scholar, he had a breakdown that he mulled over for the rest of his life.

Gustafson said that Mill’s father and intellectual friends had instilled intellectual understanding, but “what the child had indeed been lacking was the moral motivation provided through narrative stories, art and poetry.”

Gustafson’s point on narratives is particularly exciting, and his paper would be later published in Teaching Ethics, but the readers of the Mid-Valley Town Crier had an early peek at the work, from their Sarasota correspondent.

The following year, 2006, the conference was at Dartmouth, and again I sent a report to the paper directly from the conference. This time my readers and students were expecting the report. Weeks before the conference, I had begun drawing attention to it in a two-part series. The first week examined a case study taken from the Journal of Criminal Justice Ethics about a famous policeman, Captain Brady, and the next week I ran written comments on Brady from six of my students. Brady was a high
ranking policeman with a good record, so his associates covered up a slight drunk driving accident he had. I quoted six student responses—properly making sure they knew they would be quoted. Sample comments:

Female, 35, health sciences: I believe under those circumstances, where no one was injured, that [the cover-up] was okay. Brady was a 27-year veteran on the force who was admired by others . . .

Female, 23, education: What kind of example is [the cover-up] giving to the community? It is so similar to a state representative who was caught in the McAllen Airport [with a handgun] . . . and got a slap on the wrist. It makes me upset.

The students enjoyed seeing the debate in the paper, and some were clearly looking forward to more sparring on the Captain Brady case, and there was actually some anticipation of my SEAC conference reportback. It was a very good conference and I wrote two columns on it for the school and community via the Town Crier. Before I discussed my own presentation, I reported a marvelous session, led by Dr. Kim Skoog of the University of Guam, where a group of twenty conference attendees watched a PBS special on torture at Abu Ghraib. My column, e-mailed from Dartmouth to the Town Crier and its readers on campus, reflected my dismay at our nation systematically terrorizing and humiliating people:

Make no mistake, the torture was not some simple college hazing prankishness, as Rush Limbaugh has suggested, and this was not just the result of a few night shift, ill-trained, army reservists run amuck. It was a policy, a dangerous, deliberated, quite wide-spread mockery of civilized standards.

I did not hide the somber tone of this SEAC discussion. I also reported a wonderfully playful presentation by a Yale professor, Dr. Wendell Wallach, who has his students trying to figure out if, in theory, robots could be trained to act ethically. Couldn’t they calculate the greater good? Couldn’t we train ethical robot nurses, for instance, to always ask patients for informed consent? (It raised some issues Gustafson had raised the previous year.) I threw a little barb into my column.

Although still unconvinced that robots will develop consciences, I suspect future robots will have better ethics than
Secretary Rumsfeld and General Sanchez who authorized torture at Abu Ghraib.

The fillip at General Sanchez was calculated; although a cloud will always be over his career for his huge error in Iraq, he is considered by some in the Valley as a local hero. And he was even – despite grumblings from many faculty – a commencement speaker recently at our college.

I also spent a paragraph discussing a wonderful presentation on the ethics of Confucius – I questioned Confucius’ submission to authority. The last conference presentation I reported was mine, where I discussed some of the concerns of my students about Captain Brady and presented a critique of what I often hear described as an “understandable” loyalty which arises among police officers because of their hard job. I examined this glamorous “loyalty” for elements of fear, competitiveness, anger and self-pity.

The 2006 Dartmouth conference was genuinely rewarding and I experienced part of it again, by sharing it at home.

In lieu of a conclusion: The Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum annual conferences, partially because they are interdisciplinary, have a liveliness in purpose and actuality that naturally leads beyond the conference rooms and hotel lobbies. This writer over a few years has experienced that liveliness and has consciously attempted to bring back to a campus and to a needy community some of the scholarship, debate, and even sting of these SEAC conferences, and the writer encourages others to attend.