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Sydnor and Hundley

When Paul was still Dean of Arts and Sciences, I could not teach at VCU. Instead, at one point I joined the faculty of J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College as an adjunct instructor during its early years here in Richmond. All classes met at first in the old Sydnor and Hundley building on Grace Street. Later, classes were moved into the old University of Richmond building across the street from the YMCA on Franklin Street, where they continued to meet for a while after the Parham Road Campus was opened and before building permanent quarters near I-95. Over a period of some six or seven years, I taught not only on Grace Street but also on Franklin Street and the Parham Road campus. All of my classes and students were interesting.

The episodes I recall most vividly happened those first two years on Grace Street. Part of the excitement seemed to come from the very fact that our classes met in the improvised open spaces available in a former furniture store. The environment, combined with the students, fostered a number of vivid memories.



Classrooms were formed from the vast open space of a building designed for open display of furniture by using not quite head-high partitions. One quarter I taught a remedial class in grammar and composition on the second floor. My students, like most Reynolds students in those early years, were somewhat elder than the average college freshman, mostly very earnest students who seriously wanted to improve on their poor background by learning standard English. Being human, however, they found concentrating on necessarily dry rules of grammar, usage, and composition somewhat difficult; and when an abnormal psychology class met just the other side of the partial wall, many of the students found the lecture next door much more fascinating than what I was trying to interest them in. As a matter of fact, several times a student would ask me a question about the material under discussion next door - not my field.

Some really interesting learning took place in my classroom. With the students' help I usually established reasons for learning the basic standards of our language and some became quite competent. One of the first classroom essays I received from one student was short and badly faulty, with an interesting series of consonants and vowels surmounted by a crude drawing of a fat flying insect. Because the word contained not a single "b," I was amazed that he was trying to spell "bumblebee." After class I learned that he was serious about learning to spell, so I had him get a spiral notebook in which we devoted a page to each of the letters of the alphabet. We discussed the various sounds the letters could represent, and I set him the task of filling each page with words beginning with that sound - words he found in his reading of signs, cereal boxes, and other reading. Once a week we looked over those words after class and discussed new sounds embodied in some of the words he found. He worked hard; in the second class he took, he was not a flawless speller, but he had dramatically improved. Although he had been able to read in a sort of way, he had actually had no formal education. Thank goodness this difficulty was lack of education rather than some of the learning disabilities teachers generally discover.

On the first floor of the building, I had another remedial class consisting largely of students for whom English was a second language, my first efforts in teaching such people. They were an interesting and varied crew, very earnest in their quest for competence in English. In the class there was an obvious attraction between two students, one a Rudolph Valentino look-alike from Iran and the other a dainty little doll from Hong Kong. She enlisted the help of the class in selecting for herself an American name, a name that many of the Chinese students sought. One wall of the class room was part of the show window, clearly visible from the sidewalk. One day as I approached the class from the street, I saw Ali and Lucy (the name she had chosen) clearly involved in a heated discussion which looked as though it could explode into physical violence. I rushed in to find out the difficulty. Through clenched teeth, Ali said that Lucy had called him a "foreigner," an interesting epithet in that particular class, by that particular person. Lucy explained to me that Ali's Farsi language has an alphabet, something highly desirable to a person whose writing was based on idiographs. To her, anyone with an alphabet was, by definition, a foreigner. They soon simmered down enough that we could have class, but they never again seemed so close. On another occasion, I had a night class in English as a second language, composed entirely of Jordanian men who were at Reynolds to learn the science of water wells, a top priority in their country. Although the Jordanian government furnished interpreters for the basic classes they took, this particular class elected to learn English, too. We began with fifteen students, but after the first week, only seven or eight appeared, not always the same people. They told me that they wanted to learn English so that they could talk with the American girls going to Reynolds. They divided themselves into two groups, alternating in attendance so that half of them could devote themselves to talking to the girls, while the other half listened to the lesson and passed it on to the others.

From that class I learned why I had so much difficulty getting Arabs to distinguish between such words as big and pig. Arabic had the voiced "b" but not the unvoiced "p." A sound you don't have in your language is very hard to hear (witness the "ch" in

German!). My task was to teach them to hear our "p." Remembering a hint I had read once, I took to class as many matchbooks as I could find. I showed them that if they lit a match and said "b," nothing would happen. However, if they were able to sound the plosive "p" they would blow out the match. That night all the Jordanians were present. As they fascinated themselves with trying to blow out the match flame, I noticed that there were a number of faces lined up over the inside partition to our classroom. The number increased as more and more people joined the observation of a community college class of potential arsonists. By the time most of the matches from each book had been extinguished, the Jordanians were able to say "p" without mistaking it for "b," and we soon lost our audience.

Life was seldom dull when J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College met in the old Sydnor and Hundley building.