

Teacher, Interrupted: Life Lessons and Life Skills

Ed Hara

Ed Hara is a graduate of Michigan State University (master's degree and doctorate) and a veteran of high school and community college teaching. His most recent full-time position was at Oakland Community College's English department in Farmington Hills, Michigan. He has published in educational journals including Thought & Action and Community College Week. Recently Dr. Hara has developed a reading-class curriculum to be used in the community college setting and will teach that class for the first time this fall at North Central Michigan College in Petoskey, Michigan.

I'd define "life skills" to be the skills one needs in order to grapple with life's demands and win. These skills prepare one to fill out an application, dependably show up for work, collaborate, learn new jobs, speak intelligently, etc. To keep the wrestling metaphor, at the end of life's match we might not have a pin, but we have accumulated enough points to score a close decision. What a thrill it must be, when we are looking back, to say we have prevailed over that hairy Iowa farm boy, life, that has tried not only to beat us, but to *beat us up*. The troubling questions are, though: (A) what specific skills need to be taught, and (B) how best do we teach them?

I have approached these questions by reviewing the existing research on literacy and by engaging in fieldwork, which investigates first-hand what skills people need and value as they pursue their lives. I have discovered that teaching students "practical" knowledge for career success—on the level of immediately-applicable skills like resume and letter writing—tends to be devalued in academia. Historically, in many departments the "ivory tower" still exists. For some, the focus of discussions and assignments stubbornly remains removed from the world outside of school; instead, the students are taught great books and ideas, and any mention of immediate application of knowledge is suspect.

This "liberal arts" approach to life skills may in the long run prove wise, preparing our youth for "real thinking," succeeding in other classes, problem solving, and successfully matriculating into graduate schools. The practical approach, on the other hand, may prove only temporarily efficacious, as the modes and methods business and industry use today may evolve into something else tomorrow, leaving our students wishing that their instructors who had taught them with an eye to today's workplace had instead used material less affected by shifts in technology, style, and industry practice.

Interviewing community-college graduates at their workplaces on the question of life skills revealed that workers valued traditional ones, like reading and writing. However, many of them emphasized the need for "soft skills," like learning to work

as part of a team, empathizing, organizing, and problem-solving. These soft skills, while rarely appearing on a teacher's syllabus and only tangentially noted in student assignments, may constitute a more valuable educational outcome than many more apparent and traditional goals, like "reading at an X level," or "attaining a passing grade on a basic algebra test." (For more discussion on this topic, see my article "Literacy Skills for New Workers," in *The Community College Enterprise*, Spring 2002.)

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This research on life skills, while interesting, leaves the questions of what to teach, and how, open. I, like most good teachers, have spent much of my working life agonizing over this selection of what to teach, and how best to teach it. I stubbornly wanted to hit all students with my best shot: those who would eventually enter law school would learn how to write, research, argue, and bill, and those who would work on the assembly line would prove capable of building good lives for themselves and durable cars.

The last couple of years, however, have given me additional insight as to exactly what constitutes life skills. Retirement from full-time teaching has not gutted me of the need to identify these "life skills," to apply them in my own life, and subsequently to teach them

to people who could benefit. Even if I no longer work full-time, I am not immune from the threats of that "hairy Iowan" mentioned above. He makes me doubt my ability to prevail, and causes me to sweat late at night as I contemplate our next match.

Simultaneously, I worry about students. Parker J. Palmer, a noted teacher and writer, has said that "Teaching' is simply another word for the ancient and elemental bond that exists between the elders of a tribe and their young." I agree. As I face situations in my own life, I can't escape trying to isolate what should be taught to others, and how these items should be presented.

Palmer suggests the location and analysis of teachers' "critical moments" ("times when a learning opportunity will either open up or shut down") as a beginning to professional, meaningful discussion among educational practitioners. I'd add that these critical moments—either in rehearsal or replay—are the specific things that keep me awake at night. Thus, I think Palmer's methodology is applicable to the study of other areas, including defining needed life skills. My plan is to describe just a few "critical moments"—moments in everyday life in which I was momentarily paralyzed, unsure of my coping abilities, and ultimately unsure of which one of us, me or life, would prevail—that have occurred during the past few years. These moments recur nocturnally, regularly punching the third-shift time clock, hardly ever calling in sick. After my description, I'll briefly explore the relationship of each moment to "life skills," and speculate on what a teacher might emphasize in the curriculum and in the classroom in order to successfully teach these skills to students.

Critical Moment #1

The community-college instructor strolls down the hall and unlocks the door to the writing lab. This class is shaping up as a very good one; the students are motivated, energetic, and friendly to him and to each other. It is still early in the fall semester, though, and he knows this initial enthusiasm for writing might be only temporary.

Today, though, there is something in the air. One of the most promising students, a young man named Paul, strolls by not saying hello, apparently not noticing the instructor standing by the door. This behavior is unusual, as is his jamming his cell phone up to his ear.

The instructor reminds Paul of the cell-phone rule, but he still doesn't turn it off. He just turns to the teacher, as if seeing him for the first time, and says "My dad told me someone just flew a plane into the Trade Center in New York! He says you can find the video on the internet."

We logged on, and our lives began to change.

John Updike has an early short story about teaching called "A Sense of Shelter." We all had that sense before, in schools and other places—homes, the Midwest, small towns, libraries—but in a few hours that September, it disappeared.

I don't need to recount that day. For all of us, no matter what we were doing, this time was critical. At the time, I was standing in front of a college classroom, in Palmer's words, "perplexed and troubled" about just what I was to do next. For the one and one-half hour of that writing class, there were no editorialists and no real television commentary. No one was providing insight and captions.

It was up to me to say something, even as I stood in a state of shock and impotence. The class seemed very young, and I felt very old. I felt very small and ill-prepared, but still I managed to get a few words out about terrorism and violence and loss of life. Mostly, I remember, I talked about the similarities of today to the JFK assassination, and how we, this moment, were becoming permanently inscribed into each other's memories and interwoven with this tragedy. I was conscious not only of my own efforts to make some sense out of what was happening, but also of the need to help my students understand and cope.

An analysis of this critical moment shows me that I began then to really believe in the relationship between what goes on in the classroom with what occurs outside of it. I wondered, fleetingly, just what kind of schools would prepare people for killing. How, conversely, could schools help ensure that the qualities of safety, peace, self-determination, and cooperation would be available for its graduates? Could all teaching ultimately be political? The "shelter" of books, classrooms, and Midwest towns and suburbs had suddenly become an interesting anachronism, and I had been reborn into

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a life of altered consciousness and involvement from which there was no escape. After September 11, books like Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (a brilliantly written account of individual lives, histories, survivals, and deaths overlaid upon a map of the Vietnam War) had more import than they had had the day before. That day, all our lives had been permanently overlaid on a big, bloody map of the world.

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This advocacy of books like Tim O'Brien's and their associated powers to involve, to elicit thinking, and to produce an informed citizenry capable of engaging with a shrinking, diverse, and sometimes hostile world is a necessary component in teaching life skills. Consequently, I recommend a curriculum comprised of reading good, provocative, age-appropriate books like this one and discussing them with people outside the comfort zone of your family, church, or political party—people who might disagree with you. Temper these activities with applications and cases, all aimed at bridging the inside of schools and the ideas in books with the outside world, all aimed at creating people who are educated, active citizens, and not mere passive, protected consumers of propaganda and dogma. “Reading for survival,” you see, has become more than educational hyperbole.

This moment was extreme. In the interests of manageability, as well of sanity, let's now turn to some lesser “critical moments,” ones more limited and personal, yet ones also measuring ability to cope.

Critical Moment #2

Late afternoon, winter. Snow is forecast and the gray skies do little to enhance the looks of the white house on the quiet street. The house looks solid and in good condition, with tight windows, heavy black shingles, and an attached two-car garage. In the front yard is a realtor's sign with the clear plastic container of fliers frosted shut. This house has been listed for over three months. There have been no offers. Thinking of this house—and the sale that is not happening—keeps the owner awake at night.

This is my house. It is located in a small Ohio college town, and is “an excellent value.” I know that it is priced at far less than the money we have spent on it. It is safe to say that my wife and I will not be featured in a *Money Magazine* article on how to make money in real estate. The critical moment actually occurs almost nightly, as it seems to have assumed a time slot from 2:00 to 2:30 am, as I lie there wondering just what we should do next.

Successfully coping with a house that doesn't sell demands flexibility, reason, patience, and perspective. I have to remind myself: we will sell it, move where we want,

and survive. A slow house sale is not on the top ten of life's tragedies. For reminders, I read the newspaper, including the obituaries.

Can this resilience be taught? An activity that comes to mind is requiring students to complete a long-term project. Consider this project an antithesis to the "instant winner" schema promulgated by lotteries and *The Price is Right*. In this project, things will go wrong, mistakes will be made, collaborators will foul things up, sources will prove elusive, but the students *will complete the project*. They will survive, hand the paper in, get a decent grade, and in time, forget the travail associated with reaching their goal. They will, in effect, "sell their house."

And, so will I. Their class project, it turns out, was not so much on the topic of "Evolving Perceptions of Nature in Jim Harrison's Prose" as it was about getting a job done while overcoming obstacles, and then getting on with life. We all need to review this lesson of persistence and reason from time to time, include "life skills" in our assignments, and emphasize their existence and relevance to our classes.

Critical Moment #3

An activity that comes to mind is requiring students to complete a long-term project.

The man fills the tank of his Ford Ranger, and each measured click of the gas pump needles him into shifting his eyes away from the dollar total. Trying not to unsettle the female Mustang driver opposite by looking in her direction, he stares into his truck's cab, empty except for the unopened mail on the passenger seat. There is something from his mutual fund company, and he is afraid to open it.

He scowls into the emptiness, seeming to recognize that this \$35 fill-up could be a minor skirmish in the dollar-and-cents battleground of the future. He wonders briefly if all retired teachers die buying "entry level" cars and trucks, as he certainly will.

Obviously, this "critical moment" is in the financial area, with spillover into natural resources, politics, and world events. And don't think that this type of moment is unique to me; my friends voice the same type of concern, and often experience the same type of anxiety. We all worry about the financial future of ourselves and our loved ones. I wonder: can education prepare people to face this future with confidence?

Possibly. In my individual background, I'm embarrassed by the paucity of economics, investment, and finance classes. I'm reasonably sure that some required classes in these areas would help people face their financial future. Investment classes, however, will not help anyone who doesn't have a job that is paying "good money" in the first place. So let's also advocate classes dealing with employability and the future of work.

There are good arguments to be made for liberal arts education—like the core reading and discussing mentioned earlier—but the immediacy and realism of technical and vocational education, with associated activities like job-shadowing, part-time jobs, and internships, sounds like a good “fit” in this proposed curriculum. They could well help one avoid gas-pump breakdowns and 87-octane night sweats.

Anyone will soon realize that jobs, incomes, and investments do not exist in isolation from dynamic forces such as politics, and that factors such as tariffs, unionization, taxation, educational funding, quality schools and teachers, and student opportunity (grants, remediation, mentoring) all come into play. We, then, need to offer a required class in political science; hopefully, this well-conceived class will help people cut through the innuendo, distortion, “spin,” and deception that permeate many political campaigns, and help us vote for people and programs that will enhance our economic future.

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Finally, why am I conscious of buying an “entry level” car, anyway? May I suggest that I’ve let myself become misled by a Madison Avenue barrage of imagery and verbiage? Shouldn’t people who drive four-cylinder hybrids be applauded as they drive by the gas

pumps? Does Detroit’s version of “male enhancement” (i.e., “Buy a big truck or SUV!”) a reasonable and valid measure of success?

Upon analysis, this “critical moment” explodes into an array of intertwined influences and issues. A moment of financial worry, riding upon that smelly little state-inspected gas pump, evolves into recognition of the influence of politics, current affairs, and the media.

As for preparation, specific classes, like political science, are fine. But maybe there is a hidden, underlying foundation for these classes that should take precedence over the classes themselves. Once again, the foundation is composed by critical reading/literacy. We have to learn to recognize hype—whether it emanates from Washington, Detroit, or New York, and is manifested in a press conference or commercial—and hone our ability to ascertain truth. Our need for this ability is increasing as political think tanks and advertising agencies become more sophisticated in their media and packaging techniques.

Finally, let me again say how important it is to read good books. These “good books” should be consistently listed by academics, libraries, and universities as necessary reading, and should be prized as springboards for open class discussion. Their use must not be restricted by those with limited vision or unrealistic agendas, or those who just can’t recognize good writing. Many of the issues emerging from a consideration of this third “critical moment,” for example, arise in the text *1984*. Media manipulation, thought control, politics—all these issues and many more resonate

throughout George Orwell’s classic. Reading good books, then discussing them in an open, encouraging environment, might train people to maintain their balance in a world intent on manipulating us to the mat.

So, can a “real man” or “real woman” drive a hybrid with roll-up windows and a manual shift? The ads I see tell me maybe not; the \$34.70 total on my gas pump says maybe I should give one a try before my next fill-up.

Critical Moment #4

A man, over fifty, is lifting weights at a small gym in Boyne City, Michigan. It’s August, and the double doors are open, letting the outside air flow through the large room in which the few enthusiasts, as well as the stairclimbers, free weights, treadmills, and many pictures of Arnold in his prime sweatily coexist.

The weight lifter—the non-gubernatorial one—is feeling strong, and hefts 225 pounds—a few pounds over his bodyweight—and begins doing bench press repetitions. After six—okay, five—he drops the weight back on its stanchions, and sits on the end of the bench regaining his breath, and feeling a little proud.

At this point, one of the other trainees, a young man of twenty-eight or so, heads over to the guy on the bench. “How old are you?” he shouts. “Man, that was great! I hope I can lift that much when I’m your age!”

Moments like this one have been occurring for the past several years, ranging from the teen automatically giving me the senior discount at McDonald’s to nobody quizzing me as I ask for the senior movie ticket. Society seems eager to define me not as strong, or intelligent, or gentle, but as merely “old.”

The solution could be simpler than that Pandora’s Box elicited by #2, and is certainly not associated with a life-or-death issue like #1. Yet, this problem is very serious. It is one that chips away at self-confidence, and impedes one’s ability to function.

Much confidence growing education—again, no surprise—can be found in good literature. Close, critical reading of Shakespeare, for example, can take the student through characters who, while looking respectable enough on the outside, leave much to be desired on the inside. (Think *Macbeth*. Ask Duncan if he was who and what he appeared.) Shakespeare’s sonnets remind us of the temporality of looks and beauty, and the relative permanence of love, truth, and art. Much good literature, in the world beyond soap operas and *Maxim*, explores a world of value existing beneath mere appearances. There is memorable brotherhood in the novels of Wendell Berry, individual drive in the works of Lee Smith, and love in the stories of Marilynne Robinson. Even Travis Bickle, in Paul Schrader’s *Taxi Driver*, standing there in his Mohawk, aviator sunglasses,

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and bulging army jacket, is characterized as someone having redeeming qualities under his frightening exterior. Reading good books gets us in the habit of seeing below people's surfaces and avoiding quick generalizations. This skill bodes well for eliminating hordes of troubling "-isms," including racism and sexism, and even the persistent ageism I keep encountering.

We all encounter our "critical moments" in life—moment that deeply impact us, challenge us, keep us awake long into the night—through which navigation seems difficult if not impossible. Teachers should recognize these moments as life's signals for what should be taught. I've considered just a few here, but all have visited and re-visited me, and have resulted in much worry and doubt; however, I'm still here. The implications of these moments for education are complex and involved, much more so than can be thoroughly discussed in this brief essay. In summary, though, what seems obvious is that critical reading of carefully selected texts, as part of a thoughtfully conceived curriculum responding to the various calls of practicality, timelessness, and relevance should do much to help students defend against the minefield of contemporary life. Good classes, as well as reading and discussing good books, can serve as armor, protecting people from attacks to their lives, pocketbooks, and sanity. Remember that as you think through what you must teach your students in order to help them through life.

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