

The Caring Professor

A Guide to Effective,
Rewarding and Rigorous
Teaching



Professors Daniel de Roulet and David C. Pecoraro



THE CARING PROFESSOR

**A Guide to Effective, Rewarding and
Rigorous Teaching**

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Acknowledgements from David

The seeds of Student Caring were planted many years ago when I was a student and experienced the caring (and sometimes the lack of caring) of educators through my years of formal education. The seed of this book was planted, unknown to me, when I was teaching a young man by the name of Jonathan de Roulet how to transition from college to career during my course: "Career Directions and Your Daily Bread" at Vanguard University of Southern California. Jonathan went home one day after class and told his father, Daniel, how excited he was that a professor was taking a personal interest in his future. Shortly thereafter, Daniel approached me and proposed that we co-author a book about "Student Caring". That was the first time I heard those words used together. It did not take me long to ponder the significance of those words and to realize that such a book could benefit many people in higher education. I said, "Yes!" Since that day, three years ago, we have worked side by side to publish the book you are now reading. As a friend, colleague, business partner and co-author, Daniel, I thank you for the past years and look forward to the future! I remain in awe of your writing prowess. All along the way, seeds of encouragement have come from my wife, Michaelene who has been understanding and supportive of this project, with her patience through countless hours of meetings, to hours in front a computer screen and in front of a microphone. Thank you Joseph, my son and college student, who has

patiently listened to me talk about this book and The Student Caring Project during our many hours together on the freeway and rejoiced as we watched the project grow. And thanks to my high school son Christopher, who provides me with his daily smile and words of encouragement as he approaches his college years. To my Vanguard University colleagues, too many to mention, who have all been supportive of this project by providing me with living examples of student caring and support for this book, thank you!

Acknowledgements from Daniel and David

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Prologue: A New Way of Thinking about College

Our primary job—in whatever academic discipline we have received our training—is to teach the students we find in front of us.

Today's student population includes young adults seeking certificates or degrees, returning adults, international students, first-in-their family college students, students bound for graduate or medical or law school, and students enrolled to retool their skill sets for career changes. All of these people are our students, and no matter what segments of that student population we interact most with, they are our charges. If we as professors do not establish a human connection with our students, many of them will get lost in the system and fail to reach their goals. If we don't let them know that we respect them as people and learners—or if we reject them as “unprepared for college”—many of them will not experience the academic transformation for which college is famous.

50 Years of Experience

In our fifty combined years of experience in college and university classrooms, we have seen one continuing problem: we professors get our jobs by knowing our subject matter, but generally we have not been taught to teach, and we have not been convinced to understand and connect with our audience.

Graduate programs train their students to become experts in their professions, as they should. They also prepare their students for academic research jobs that are fewer and farther between as each decade passes, as higher education continues to experience larger classes, increased teaching loads, and declining academic skill levels among students. Students entering our colleges and universities come from increasingly complicated demographics; they often do not share in common even their reasons for going (or coming back) to school and seem to be unfamiliar with the expectations of college and university life.

New professors often enter the classroom with a love of their subject matter—a love that can be infectious—but precious little (if any) teaching experience in the classes they will be expected to teach. Sometimes they have no teaching background at all.

More experienced veterans of the classroom have developed their own style of teaching over the years, but have learned on the job, and often join their younger colleagues in voicing disappointment that students seem to lack both intellectual curiosity and expected skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking. This is not to say that college classes are not successful in accomplishing their goals. Amazingly, they are. Students become excited about learning, professors experience the joy of seeing this happen and continue to research their fields of study, and students and professors still meet for the celebration of graduation. It's just that all of this is happening less than it used to, and less often than it should.

We are calling for a new way of thinking about college. We are not calling for expensive programs and structural additions in difficult economic times; instead, we are simply calling for new and experienced college professors to be supported in the art of becoming successful teachers and mentors.

We're confident that the time you invest in this book will serve you well. We have been thinking about these issues for a long time, and, as we like to say, we have been taking notes! We wish that we had had this information when we started out in the classroom, but we're happy we can pass it along to you now.

With best wishes for a successful and satisfying career,

Daniel de Roulet and David C. Pecoraro

Teaching 101: Education and Interaction

Half of the students we accept into our colleges and universities never graduate.

Only a little over 50% of American college students earn bachelors' degrees in four years. When students write essays or reports, or take exams in our classes, anything under 60% constitutes failure.

Welcome to today's world of higher education—an environment where more students than ever before, from just about every imaginable demographic, seek college degrees and often do not receive them. Higher education continually invests more resources into admissions, co-curricular programs, retention studies, and graduation plans, but graduation rates remain unsatisfactory, students take longer to meet their degree requirements (so much so that colleges now budget for significant student attrition), and, for learners, the consequences of dropping out or stopping out have become disastrous.

The need for college professors to serve as guides for students in difficult times has not changed much over the years. John Gardner wrote, all the way back in 1981, “Students need mentors and facilitators. They need, in the words of Carl Rogers, authentic professional human beings who are worthy of emulation. They need models who exhibit professional behavior, a sense of commitment and purposefulness, and a sense of autonomy and integrity in a world that generates enormous stress. Students cannot be told how to do this; authenticity cannot be transmitted through lectures” (Gardner 70). The answer to student success and retention is not always money (although more investment in today's schools is needed). Professors who know

about, care about, and invest in their students' learning often make the difference between success and failure.

Students look to professors as the people who will help most to pull them through the labyrinth of gaining a college degree. When this connection with professors does not occur, students often feel disconnected from their educations, discouraged, and lost. Despite whatever requirements a college or university communicates regarding research, publishing or performance, committee work, or the necessity of meetings, professors will spend the great majority of their time in the classroom, creating lesson plans and evaluating student work. Professors primarily teach. We also know that far too many full-time professors have not heard as much as they need about becoming excellent teachers. A new professor might in fact enter the profession with a list of unanswered questions:

- ✓ How do I successfully impart my knowledge to my students?
- ✓ How do I make students enthusiastic about my courses?
- ✓ Am I prepared to meet the range of my students' educational needs?
- ✓ How will my students, my colleagues, and administrators judge my efforts in the classroom?
- ✓ How do I follow in the footsteps of professors that I respect?
- ✓ How do I communicate to my students that I care about their welfare, and how do I keep from being taken advantage of by dishonest or panicked students?
- ✓ How do I know my students are learning?

We're here to offer some help.

What This Book Will Give You

The Caring Professor: A Guide to Effective, Rewarding, and Rigorous Teaching, is divided into three sections. These are meant to build one upon another, but given your particular interests or where you are in your career, each section may be read as a stand-alone guide as well. We conclude the book with a discussion of resources, one of which is our website which provides samples of the methods and materials we discuss. You may modify our website's materials as you wish for use in your classes.

We focus on understanding the needs and challenges of today's students, tested methods of successful teaching and class triage, and trends in education. The goal of the book is a rewarding, effective and rigorous experience for students and professors alike.

The first section of the book, Teaching 101, looks at the basics of student-professor interactions. Topics include student disconnection from education, student expectations of college, academic preparedness, financial realities, teaching in a culture of negotiation, establishing boundaries, and connecting with students to improve learning.

Teaching 102 discusses putting together and nurturing successful courses based on a foundation of care for your students' academic growth and well-being. Subjects include setting and reinforcing tone and course goals, course design built on learning goals, recognizing the signs and changing the direction of a course that has gone off track, and ending a class well.

Teaching 103 presents advanced strategies and background for addressing trends and difficult situations in education today, and for helping students succeed. Topics include building classes that encourage critical thinking and introduce students to the expectations of college academic life, the stages of student academic development, caring for students in online settings, strategies for addressing difficult student

encounters, and introducing students to vocations and the practical aspects of entering the work force, internships and apprenticeships, and graduate work.

E-Resources

We are building a series of appendices (constantly updated on our resources website, CaringProfessor.com), designed to help you put into practice what we have discussed. These include podcasts, handouts and surveys, guides to building syllabi and planning class meetings, resource guides, and student planning guides on everything from time management to “life design” of short- and long-term goals after college.

Good college teaching is not magic. It is not an ability we are born with. No matter how comfortable or uncomfortable, at home or alien, we feel when we first step into a classroom, that feeling only takes us so far or slows us down so much. College teaching is a learned art, and one has to keep relearning parts of it as often as one’s audience changes—every semester.

We hope that the pages that follow help you in your continual growth as a college or university professor by making your teaching truly effective, rewarding, and rigorous.



Congratulations: You've Been Thrown into the Pool

Why do we often put our least experienced professors with our least experienced students?

Our students are “thrown into the pool” to sink or swim in college and university life—but they’re not the only ones. We ourselves come from a culture of “swimming instructors” who believe in the sink or swim method. For example, residency programs give doctors-in-training terrible shifts and front-line, anxious patients. Young drivers are encouraged to overcome their fears by getting on the expressway. Colleges and universities assign our least-trained teachers to “less desirable” courses because seniority is used as a way of teaching what one has always wanted to teach.

There’s much to be said for the learning by experience method of being thrown into the pool. The problem with all the examples above is that the various “pools” into which we are thrown are populated with other swimmers who would rather not drown with us. Patients can suffer from doctors’ inexperience; expressways do not need more unpredictable, unprepared drivers; and introductory college courses often are the hardest to teach well (and they enroll students with significant educational needs).

New professors actually find themselves in worse straits than new drivers, novice swimmers, and residents or interns. At least in those categories, the task is clear and primary: drive, swim, practice medicine. New professors have spent their recent training not learning how to teach, but becoming experts in their

fields of study—fields that may comprise their writing and research but that often have only indirect connections to the classes they will be teaching. In other words, upon beginning their professorial careers, new professors do not spend eighty percent of their time researching or performing in their fields of expertise; instead, they teach, and they spend very little time teaching about the specific subjects of their masters’ theses or doctoral dissertations. And much of their information about how to teach has come vicariously. This would be like learning to drive by being a lifelong passenger, learning to swim by standing in a pool watching swimmers, and learning to be a doctor by being an experienced patient. We will not take up, at this point, why some graduate programs—which realize that their graduates are going to base their professional success on teaching—are not training their enrollees in how to teach. (Many do, and should be applauded.) It is just curious to note that a troubling number of new professors are unprepared for the task at hand.



Moreover, who learns about students? We know what kind of students we were. (We were the ones who liked school.) But generally we were not students who struggled, or who enrolled in classes just to “get through them,” or who were in college preparing for vocations outside education. We professors walk into our classrooms believing our job is to present information and skills and to test students on how well they have absorbed information and have come to be able to apply it. But what do we know about these students in terms of their preparedness, learning abilities, interests, and personal barricades to learning? Most likely, we have heard from our peers negative reports: grade-obsessed students, academic dishonesty, absenteeism, misbehavior in class, and student complaints filed against professors.

So, is it any surprise that new professors—even those who seem to have a gift for teaching—face difficulties in their classrooms and, in the worst cases, see teaching as something that they must “get through” in order to pursue their research interests? Is it any wonder that students and parents ask why they are paying thousands of dollars to be taught by people who hold such a point of view? The answers are not often satisfactory. Imagine a new driver involved in an accident on the expressway who tells the Highway Patrol officer, “I realize that I have just caused a five-car accident but, you see, my real interest is studying the theory of rush-hour traffic flow.”

The Collateral Damage Theory of Teaching

If one did not know any better, one might assume that colleges have taken on an idea of teaching that is associated with some modern military theories. In reaching a military objective, a commander realizes that the mission will incur a (hopefully limited) amount of collateral damage among the civilian population. In a purely on-the-job-training method of teaching, we often throw what we have in there and hope for the best: we hope the course objectives will be satisfied and that there won't be any serious injuries. (We would argue that one result is a fifty percent graduation rate, which belies a rather poor success ratio.)

Here are three scenarios of new college teaching and learning that illustrate such a view.

Scenario 1: The Water is Cold

A new professor walks into an Introduction to Sociology course. He is greeted by thirty students not on the roster who want to enroll. Several students on the roster are either absent or wander in at some point during the class. Few students have the textbooks. Many seem unengaged. What the new professor had planned as a rousing talk on what sociology is all about and its importance to our world

today devolves into an hour of roster adjustment, syllabus reading, and instructions on what students need to do in order to be prepared for the next class meeting.

The next class meeting seems to be going a little better. Our new professor, after making further roster adjustments and handing out additional copies of the syllabus (or directing, again, students to the class web site to obtain documents and assignments), actually begins to lecture. Students take notes. The lecture is interrupted twice, however—once by a student who is enrolled but “couldn’t attend the first day” and another time by a small group of students who enter the classroom and wonder if any spaces are available. Our professor presses on. Then, about half way through his lecture, he asks questions and comes to the conclusion that most of the students did not complete the reading for today. He gives an impromptu quiz, finishes (part of) his lecture, and realizes that he is about a class meeting behind from where he wants to be in imparting the course content.

During his next two lectures, he rushes through the material to catch up. Students should be taking notes, but many are just listening; one or two are gazing out the window. Some seem to be texting. Attendance is not the best. The scores on the quiz were miserable. As he introduces the first essay assignment, he mentions (having heard the low down from his colleagues) that academic dishonesty is something to be taken very seriously, and that he will be on the lookout. One or two students ask questions about small details that are clearly stated on the assignment sheet and the course syllabus. He notices that a good number of students have not brought the book to class—can it be that some students still have not bought the book? One student asks a question that seems to have an edge to it at the end of lecture; he does not know how to respond, given that he does not remember his own professors answering such questions.

Not everyone turns in the first essay, and when he distributes the first exam—clearly stated on the syllabus’s course schedule—not everyone is present and some

seem surprised that an exam is being given. At the end of class that day, a few students approach him and ask if they can still hand in the essay for full credit even though it will be late. One student has apparently simply left a late essay on the podium. In subsequent class meetings, student questions become more infrequent. One day, five minutes into a lecture, a student raises his hand and asks if there will be a review session for the upcoming midterm. Several students in the back of the class are talking quietly; others are texting. At the end of another class, two students come up to appeal their essay grades. Upon returning to his office, he receives an email that the department chair would like to meet with him regarding a student complaint.

What has happened, he thinks? Who are these unprepared, indifferent, and sometimes even hostile students? He has just been trying to teach the course material. Perhaps, he thinks, he needs to be tougher.

Scenario 2: The Water is Warm (But a Little Murky)

After some successful experiences teaching first-year writing in her graduate program, our second new professor feels more than prepared for the first day of classes. She expects the first day or two to be chaotic as students try to put together schedules, and she knows that they expect the first week to be chaotic as well. In fact, if too much were to be accomplished, she would be violating unofficial expectations. So, on the first day, after establishing a humorous tone, she explains parts of the syllabus (especially how grades will be calculated), waits until mid-class to take roll, and asks those still wishing to add to sign a waiting list. She says she will resolve roster questions on Wednesday, and several waiting-list students leave. At this point she conducts a writing diagnostic—something the department requires to ensure proper course placement—but she knows that she will read these mainly to identify her better students.

She has the advantage of several planned class sessions that “work”—good lectures, interactive exercises, pre-writing, models of excellent writing, and interesting readings that crisply divide the classes as she eases the students into the first essay assignment. This goes as expected: her top students perform well, others settle into the B-range, some receive C’s and D’s and accompanying opportunities to rewrite the essay. She knows that some of the lower-scoring students will drop. A few do.

From the time she has stepped into the college classroom as a graduate student, she has had a gift for lecturing and for involving students in controversial topics; these, she assures herself, promote the critical thinking that good college students expect, and the topics keep the class interesting. The in-class exercises vary the work enough to keep the students’ attention, and she is careful to remind students of the upcoming due dates and the date of the midterm.

The class moves along well enough. Students seem to enjoy the sessions; some of her good students are clearly motivated. But, as the midterm approaches, a few questions tug at the corners of her thoughts—questions that have been inconveniently clarifying since her early teaching experiences in her graduate program. We’re having a good time, and class is stimulating, but how much are the students learning about writing? Moreover, how many students show significant improvement? “A” students score A’s, with occasional troubles. “C” students edge toward B’s. Her struggling students seem to be achieving on some aspects of the assignments, but their progress is unsteady, inconsistent, and riddled with occasional steps backwards. A number of them have not dropped, but are no longer regularly attending. She knows her evaluations will be fine, with one or two outliers. She confesses, however, that she is not sure if very many of her students are becoming better writers.

Our first two scenarios could be used to illustrate student complaint and student comfort. In neither case is the professor uninterested in students or their

success. Although the first professor is likely to end up with lower course evaluations, in neither class are students—beyond those who already are thriving in college—finding much success. Both courses have discontented students. The first group will respond out of frustration; the second will likely not complain too much because it is hard to put a finger on what is wrong, or because the class is not atypical. Both courses cover the expected material—the second perhaps more energetically—but neither will work that well in strengthening its students’ academic skills. Both professors likely will not be happy in the long term. Both courses will contribute to the institution’s unfavorable attrition rate; most importantly, a significant number of students in each class will neither realize their hopes for college, nor better understand themselves as learners and people, nor realize what college could have meant for them. For very few of the students will “the light go on”—one or two may have a life-changing experience, but many will experience confirmations, positive or negative, of how they already feel about education.

No one wants these results, of course. What has happened is this: both professors, with varying levels of experience and interpersonal skills, have entered their classrooms with set ideas about what they will teach, but have not considered whom they will teach.

What follows is our third scenario—a preview of the day in a life of a surprisingly typical college student.

Scenario 3: What Kind of Water is This?

As she returns to her car at the edge of the parking lot at the end of her first day at college, our student is wondering how all of this will work out.

High school was familiar, if not always challenging. She had a cohort of friends who took classes together, but its members have now gone their separate ways. She is the first in her family to attend college, and she finds her new environment anything but familiar. Syllabi, book orders, add and drop dates, financial aid forms, being a commuter on a campus where many of the students seem to live in the residence halls—all of this leaves her feeling like an outsider, and a not-very-competent new student. Her two Monday classes left her without much of a sense of what exactly those classes would cover. Both seemed disorganized—concerned more with figuring out who was in the class than what they would teach her. Her classmates are a blur—everyone is a stranger to her, and yet cliques have already started forming.

As classes continue, she feels anonymous. One of her teachers seems angry with the students—she doesn't know why he is, and she would like to ask him some questions about sociology, a subject that she feels a connection with. He seems to know his material, but he also seems unapproachable, and his expertise is intimidating. Two of her courses are large lectures, so there is not much hope of interaction there. Her writing class seems more active. The concepts are interesting and the class activities are entertaining—not the straight lectures she expected. As the first essays and exams come due, however, she is not sure how to prepare. She really doesn't know what she'll be expected to demonstrate, and she suspects that the memorization that served her well in high school will not be enough. Besides, the teachers' connections to the textbook are loose, at best. She wonders why she paid over \$400 dollars—money that she really does not have—for books that will not be used very much. On the Friday before her first exam, she once again enters the financial aid office to fill out another form, even though she thinks this could be the second or third time she has submitted it. She would like someone to talk to about all of this, but she doesn't know any upperclassmen, she is hesitant about visiting a professor's office hours, and the few friends she has made seem as confused as she is.

Midterms come and go, and the results are disappointing: B's and C's, and little feedback on how to improve. She has come to understand that a lot of the responsibility for her success seems to be on her—something she expected in college. Still, after eight weeks at her college she feels alone. Her parents are sympathetic but don't have the experience to offer her any advice. In fact, they don't seem to understand how much time college takes, and they wonder why she is not home more, helping out around the house and watching her little brother and sister. Registration for next semester approaches, but she wonders if she should return.

How typical is this student scenario? Much more typical than we would like to believe. In the following chapters, we'll explain why education needs to take place in classrooms where professors understand their students.

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THE AUTHORS



David C. Pecoraro

Daniel de Roulet

Professor David C. Pecoraro, M.F.A.

David, a native of southern California, is a first-generation college graduate. While in junior high school, he was introduced to the world of theater and immediately knew he would spend his career there.

His higher education studies began at Fullerton Community College followed by studies at San Diego State University and California State University, Fullerton where he received his B.A. in theater. He completed his education at Temple University, receiving an M.F.A. in theater design and technology.

All of this foreshadowed his career in higher education. He began teaching at Saddleback Community College where he was an adjunct professor and theater production manager for 17 years. This was followed by seven years teaching the graduate program in stage management at the University of California, Irvine.

Currently, David is a professor at Vanguard University, a private four-year institution, where he teaches courses in theater and the arts.

David's professional credits include work as a lighting designer, production manager, and stage manager for countless theatrical productions, the Olympics, a Superbowl halftime show, Disneyland, a Papal visit, and events for the President of the United States.

David's wife, Michaelene, teaches special education students as an adjunct professor. His oldest son Joseph is in the middle of his undergraduate years and his youngest son Christopher is in the middle of his high school years. When David is not busy with teaching or learning, he goes to the movies and spends time celebrating life with family and friends.

Professor Daniel de Roulet, Ph.D.

Born on the east coast, Daniel quickly realized that he was genetically incapable of playing major league baseball and developed interests in writing and literature. He attended the University of California, Irvine, when it was a small school, gained a B.A. in English and Creative Writing, and entered the world of business to write and make his way.

He met his wife, Teresa, and they both went to graduate school, Daniel gaining a Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of California, Irvine, which was becoming a much larger school. He benefited there from training and experience in teaching, and took a job at North Park College in Chicago, where the winters were cold and long and the colleagues and students were warm and bright. Over the years he has served various institutions as professor of English, chair of departments and faculty committees, Dean of the Undergraduate College, and Associate Provost. He was able to rediscover the classroom full time again as a professor, this time at Irvine Valley College (a community college of about 14,000 students) in southern California.

Daniel has published articles on literature and culture, reviewed books and interviewed authors, and has written a book of his own--but is not the French/Swiss novelist by the same name. They may be related, but if so, are separated by about 300 years.

Daniel's spouse Teresa returned to school at midlife and is now a family physician. His son Jonathan is in an M.F.A. program for lighting design. Daniel's second son, Eric, is writing and considering graduate school. His youngest son, Kevin, is in the middle of his undergraduate career. The de Roulets have three cats. Daniel still follows baseball.

COMMUNITY, CONNECTIONS, AND OUR NEXT BOOK

The Caring Professor Website: <http://www.caringprofessor.com>

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Watch for our next book:

**What Professors Wish Parents Knew About College**

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