

CR: Welcome to *Professors Talk Pedagogy*, a podcast from the Academy for Teaching and Learning at Baylor University. I'm your host, Christopher Richmann. *Professors Talk Pedagogy* presents discussions with great professors about teaching, curriculum, and learning in order to propel the virtuous cycle of teaching. As we frankly and critically investigate our teaching, we open new lines of inquiry. We engage in conversation with colleagues and we attune to students' experiences. All of which not only improves our teaching, but enriches and motivates ongoing investigation. And so the cycle continues. Today, our guest is Robert Darden, professor in Journalism, Public Relations, and New Media at Baylor University. Teaching at Baylor since 1988, Professor Darden has taught a range of courses from Magazine Writing to Screenwriting to Intro to Mass Communication. He has written over two dozen books, his most recent being the two volume history of black sacred music, *Nothing but Love in God's Water*. Professor Darden has won numerous teaching awards, including the Cornelia Marschall Smith Award in 2011. This year, Professor Darden was also named a Baylor master teacher, the highest honor for teaching bestowed by the university. We are thrilled to speak with him about the power of storytelling, teaching with emotion and humor, love for your students, and much more.

Robert Darden, welcome to the show and thank you for joining us today.

RD: My pleasure, it's great to be here.

CR: I'd like to begin just by asking you to give our listeners a little bit of background on yourself, what roles you've had at Baylor and how long you've been here?

RD: Sure! After my master's degree, I went to work in newspapers for a decade. And then I quit and freelanced for 10 years, wrote a dozen books and hundreds of articles and edited a couple magazines. Then in 1999, the Professional Writing department in the English department called and asked if I would like to go full time. I'd been lecturing in three different departments mostly for fun. [chuckles] In my opinion. I don't know what the students thought. I taught in Film and Digital Media and English and Professional Writing. And they asked if I'd like to go on tenure track. And I think it's in part because Baylor was shifting into needing more publications, in those days, and I had a bunch, so there I went. So I got tenure in the English Professional Writing department, and then in May requested and was requested to move to the Journalism department. So I have been in the Journalism department 16 years, after four or five years in English and Professional Writing. My master's is in journalism and it was probably a better fit. Everybody in the Journalism department has had a job before academia. And they're usually bad jobs, bad paying journalism jobs of bad hours and no weekends and very few weeks off. And all of a sudden, all of us are in the best job we've ever had in our lives. So, what's not to like? You go into journalism because you're an extrovert, most of the time, anyway. So talking to people, talking to students, is part of our DNA. In other professions, perhaps education, a lot more introverts. And yeah, it's a, it's a fun, lively crew and I give no mercy and I expect no mercy in the faculty meeting

CR: Well, you probably just nailed, without intending to, nailed why I didn't go on into a career in journalism even though my undergraduate was in writing composition with a journalism emphasis. But I moved away from that as I went into study of church history, primarily looking

back and seeing that it was it was a matter of I lacked the true extrovert personality type for that work to sustain for the long haul.

RD: Here's my theory: All preachers, all musicians, and all college professors are introverts.

CR: And I am all three of those things. Oh my gosh.

RD: And teaching, preaching, and music allows you to step into a role and then you're somebody there. And then when it's over, you go out. Those who know me say I never step out of that role, which is why I chose journalism.

CR: Yeah. Well, this might have turned into a counseling session for me. Before we get too far, let me ask you, you were recently named a Baylor master teacher. So congratulations on that. And I know you've been in print with some interviews on that, but can you just say a little bit about what that award communicates or what it means to you, personally?

RD: Oh, wow. Oh, oh, I was so fortunate, I'm grateful every day. I came to Baylor in the early 70's. And Baylor is wonderful now, and it was wonderful then. But it was wonderful then because it wasn't a publication obsessed place. Just to be fair, to be 76th, as we are, nationally, publication has had to become a near obsession. Well, in those days, there wasn't that, you got tenure for great teaching and nothing else. About half my professors had PhDs, probably half didn't. But with a very few exceptions, they were extraordinary communicators. And most of them, the Bob Reids and the David McHams and the Ann Millers, and the Ralph Lynns, and all these legendary names in Baylor history who I took were mesmerizing in the classroom. They came in and they started weaving stories and drawing you into this narrative, and that includes some of the sciences. O.T. Hayward in Geology made us all want to switch to become geology majors and look at rocks professionally. That's what they did, they all taught a 4/4. If they published, it was for fun. But what Baylor was as late as the mid to late seventies was a teaching college. And I just, you know, I was a military brat, so I'm just a chameleon anyway and I just sucked all that stuff in. Yeah. And whatever success I have had, at teaching (and Baylor has been very generous to me in recent years. Last year, the Baylor Alumni Foundation named me outstanding alumni) is that I am trying to pass it forward. That passion for standing there, that honor, that privilege for standing in front of a bunch of kids who are wide-eyed and scared and excited, and on the cusp of just so many great things. And to be a part of their lives, in many cases forever. Those teachers who taught me at Baylor, and there's only a few still surviving, Rachel Moore is still with us, Berry Klingman, and just a few others (because I'm old, I'm 66, you know, it makes sense) stayed in touch with me, kept up with me back in the days before emails when it was hard to keep in touch with people. They checked in on me. And I have tried to make that my goal and passion since. I keep up with, I don't know how many hundreds and hundreds of former students, 'cause I tell them on the first day of class, on the last day of class, you will always be one of my students. You can never not call me and ask for help or advice or just to share great news. And many of them have taken me up on it. Some of them are taking it too far, and that's that - they'd [inaudible] me and all their movies and books, and novels and TV shows. But other than that, it's been quite a wonderful ride.

CR: You mentioned the trait of great communication that you remember from those classic, the classic era of Baylor master teachers. So, we've talked about storytelling and narrative as part of that, as one element perhaps of that, of that communicating ability. You've done a Seminar for Excellence in Teaching with the ATL on that topic. So, can you say a little bit about how you see storytelling fitting into your own teaching?

RD: The human animal learns by story. That's how, from littlest kids, to right up until the end, we have, for a million years, stories over campfires, and now over pixels, screens, is how we've assimilated new information. Little kids watch their parents and see what they do and create narratives to try to make sense out of chaos. And I think why I was so attracted to journalism is, that's what good journalists and good writers do. 10,000 unrelated facts and try and shape and make some kind of sense of all of this that creates from that, and there! And my students are bombarded with so much more information than I ever got. They get more information through the Internet and other stuff in a year than people before us got in a lifetime, millions of pieces of information coming at them. And that, they hunger for the facts, that not to exclude, but to order and to shape. So I spend a whole lot of time trying to make sure the kids understand where things fit. Yeah. And why this matters. I just don't tell them "this matters." I really try to say *why* this matters. There was a wonderful show on PBS years and years ago called *Connections*, where he would say, "Why is this this way today?" And he would take it all the way back to Roman times and show how all the twists and turns led to why our interstate highway system is this many feet wide. How many mules wide is it? And why did that matter? And how did that fit in? And I think kids learn better when they realize, (a) that this matters, and (b), that there's a method to our madness, that there's a purpose. I think some of us had, the mistaken thing is that we are unfolding law, the secrets and we're doling them out to the kids. And there's much more they'll never know. And what I want is them to have the keys to be able to unlock those secrets themselves. Boy, as you know from teaching is, when you see that face, it goes, "Oh, oh, that — I get that. That makes sense." Man, there isn't anything better than that. Storytelling does that better than formulas. It's better than reading text from a book and standing flat-footed at the podium. It does it better than anything that I've seen about making this stuff matter and real. And in a world with so much information that that's what they're searching for. And when you can do it like O.T. Hayward did in Geology and Robert Packard did it for me in Physics, then you've got a master teacher.

CR: Yeah, it seems to me that the real key is that storytelling brings a student into the topic because we're all telling stories. The nature of stories is to relate to them. And so as you say, rather than just delivering the scholarly conclusions from on high, with the veil over Moses's face, as it were, you've got them, them participating in it. Even if they're just listening to a story, we usually think of that as passive, but it's certainly not, if it's got their imagination firing.

RD: They're moving stuff in their head. The biggest lecture I do every year, and the one I have heard, now, for thirty years, is the Hero's Journey. I do that in my writing classes, my screenplay, my big Intro to Mass Comm class. What makes a great movie great? And more often than not, it's following the Hero's Journey. And at some point during the lecture, I hope they figure out, and I hope lead hence along the way, is, man, this is your story. You're on the Hero's Journey right now. This is one of the steps along the way. You're going to overcome, and in the great Heroes Journey there are two steps back for every step forward. And that's normal, guys. It's

okay. That's how we learn. As the Donnie McClurkin song says, "We fall down, we get up, we fall down, we get up. A saint is just a sinner who fell down and got up." And you're going to be that guy that gets up. They're going to be that guy that gets up. This is your story and that's why that movie moves you so much. So as soon as it was over, you sprang out of your chair and you texted all of your friends saying, "You've gotta see this!" as opposed to a movie that's just funny or just scary, and you walk out and you say, "Well, what's for dinner tonight?" It's that engaging because it's your life as we all walk through this together. So, I sound like a televangelist. I'm sorry, I do that.

CR: In a good way! What — so you are known, and I think we're getting a taste of it here in this conversation, you are known, unless the rumors are not true, as an engaging lecturer. And you know, when people like in my kind of roles in centers for teaching and learning, we try to help faculty think about themselves as teachers and identify teaching styles and techniques. So, you know, by nature, we might classify this type of teaching as a lecture style. What do you think goes into effective lecturing?

RD: Passion. You gotta love this stuff. If you don't love what you're talking about, and if you don't love the kids that are looking at you, then you really need to get into administration. I mean, I mean something else. You need to - that's a cheap shot, I know. You need to find something else. The kids are so smart. They can tell if you don't care. They can tell if you're going through the motions. They can tell if you're giving this lecture and you're thinking about your golf game. I clearly love writing. I wouldn't do it all the time. This is my 25th book that I'm working on now. And I certainly love the kids. My own kids sat in those seats, my grandkids maybe someday will. And then the fact that you are passionate about it, I think needs a physical manifestation. I think to teach, these kids need to see, like, at a really good TED talk. And we talk all the time "well, they have short attention spans, they don't know anything but their phone." But I've watched them watch TED Talks, just glued, on somebody just standing up there with a microphone, and weaving them in for fifteen minutes. And I've watched them listen to podcast after podcast. I know it's there. What are those good TED Talks doing? What are the good podcasts doing? And part of that, part of it is, if it's exciting, be excited. If you're angry about the way life is right now, show it in your voice. If you get upset. I do a lecture every year, I dread it every semester, in my big class on advertising. I do three lectures on advertising in Mass Communication. And one of them is why advertising has led to this epidemic of anorexia and bulimia among Baylor females? Well, I have a daughter and I have a granddaughter, and I have lost friends and students. One of the best freshmen students I've ever had, never came back. And if you can't get passionate about that, if you can't get excited about, if you can't shout about the people who continue to force little girls to look live near prostitutes, that there's so much pressure on 11, 12-year-old to wear a bra and the makeup and lipstick. Then you're in the wrong biz. And writing has opened up the entire world to me. Or, there's very few places I haven't been able to go that writing in some way has enabled, that there are very few topics that are important to me that I haven't been able to write about. And I flatter myself that I may have made a difference on some of them because of writing. Why wouldn't you want that for the kids who could do that and go out there and change the world? So yes, I laugh. I shout. I whisper. I stomp. I point. I cajole. I threaten.

CR: It's all very human.

RD: And they see that, and they know and I, particularly in the small writing classes, I tell them it's about the failures as well as the successes. For those 25 books, I probably have several 100 rejection letters. My agent used to keep them for me and I told him finally, to throw the damn things away, I mean, I know. They missed out on something good, is all I can say. And I tell them why, in retrospect, why they turned it down, and why you don't have to make that mistake.

CR: Well, you offered these, these thoughts in response to what makes for effective lecturing. Loving your material, being passionate about your material and loving your students, being passionate about your students. It's funny that you, that you put it, put it that way in those, in those categories. I was asked last year to give a guest presentation and lead a discussion in a graduate student teaching seminar. And the topic that I was asked to, to discuss was joy in teaching. And I had never formally organized my thoughts about joy and teaching. I knew that I had it. Well. In fact, there's a funny story. When I was coming out of anesthesia at one time, not too long ago. This is what my wife told me. I was saying, because, you know, you don't, you have no idea what you're saying. You know. You come out. And apparently what I was saying coming out of anesthesia was "Teaching is my joy." True story. So I, so apparently it's in there somewhere, but I never really formalized my thoughts about it. But as I prepared this presentation, that's precisely what I landed on. I said, you, you have to love your material at every level that you can communicate it. At the level for freshmen and at the level for graduate students. And you have to love the students. If you don't have those two things. If you're not nurturing those two things intentionally, your joy will wane.

RD: And that means probably more work. That means my PowerPoints are updated weekly, and they're not just updated with facts and figures, they're updated with pictures, they're updated. I have 100 short film clips that I have excruciatingly, 'cause I'm not very technical, edited. I was a film critic for 15 years. I know good movies. Movie and TV clips and music clips. And TED Talks that. I talk and I say, "Oh, I could tell you about this, but let me show you this." And they're short, and they're specific to what they want and need. And your passion shows up in the technical side. Now, I'll never master that new whatever it is, video or the one that swoops, that the new PowerPoint or everybody's using and stuff.

CR: Oh, the Prezi, Prezi.

RD: I asked some of my students who have teachers that use it and they say, "Oh, I wish they wouldn't." They say using it bad is worse than not using at all. Give us what we need, make it entertaining. I have, you know, I edited a religious humor and satire magazine for 20 years, the *Wittenburg Door*. So if it means a great editorial or a cartoon, then that's what it takes to make that punchline. Well, that takes tracking that down, copying it, putting it into PowerPoint at the right place, and not settling. And in some fields, they're changing weekly. There are internet lectures I can barely keep up with. And that shows you care. And the kids can tell. I never had many teachers like this, but my students tell me there are those who are still caught somewhere in the past, not just in their facts and figures, but in their presentation that they're kind of god-like figures who, in a monotone, tell them and then expect them, that that's going to be life-changing.

CR: Well, how've — you've taught long enough that I assume that there's been things that you've tried, maybe, and added to your, to your repertoire, things that you've tried and discarded, and how — How has your teaching changed over the years?

RD: I have. My PowerPoints, for one thing, have gotten better because they've gotten fewer words. Now most of my PowerPoint just have a handful of words. And I let the kids print them out ahead of time and they can take their notes. I've emphasized handwritten notes because the new studies, including one last week, show that people retain a nearly 25 percent more of what they write down than what they type or underline. It's, an excellent study came out of England two years ago. And that what I discovered with that is that bare skeleton outline is helpful for them, but it's more helpful for me because it makes sure I don't follow all these interesting rabbit trails that I just — because I don't go up there with notes now, like Bob Reid in that regard, I am. I use the pictures and the outlines to trigger the stories. And like a good comic. And if you've ever been to Second City TV or the Groundlings in LA, go on a Tuesday night. Because the biggest and most famous comics try out their material on a Tuesday night for five bucks. And they have their manager sitting there with their list of jokes, then when nobody laughs at one, he goes, and if some big laughs, check check. Well, I'm paying attention to my class. And if something is just boring them to tears or something that used to make them laugh, an allusion, is now too old because they don't know any movies older than four years, then you need to upgrade your movie allusion. You need to upgrade your whatever context that you're talking about. And if you're not continually improving and honing and paying attention, then you're just regurgitating what was fed to you 50 years earlier, and thinking that because you're so god-like this is gonna somehow get through their little brains. And you wonder why your faculty evaluations are so bad. It must be because these students aren't nearly as smart as you were. There's an arrogance to teaching we've gotta be careful of, and I still see that from some of my colleagues through the years that I've observed their classes. Now, it is a privilege to be there. It's not their privilege. It's your privilege. This is one of the sacred professions.

CR: I'm so glad that you mentioned the handwritten notes, I think the evidence is pretty clear as you were as you were saying, that students, they engage better, they retain the information better. And there's, there's increasingly more studies that are, that are showing this. Are you, are you weighing in on the debate about laptops in the classroom?

RD: I prohibited them four years ago. Can't use your phone, can't use your laptop. If my TA sees you with either of those, it's points off your final exam grade. You can't, unless it's an OALA situation, you either can not take notes, you can sleep, or you can take notes. And the semester — because in the big class, obviously with 280, it's scantron, multiple guess true, false. I can chart scores through the years. And the average scores on all four tests, the second semester after I banned laptops, went up 17%.

CR: My goodness.

RD: In one semester. And they stayed high, ever since. And I don't understand all the science except for it's storytelling. You are organizing, what you're hearing into a coherent story. When you're taking notes on a laptop, all you're doing is typing,

CR: Right.

RD: And the studies on underlining in books are showing that's as good as nothing. It doesn't do anything at all. There's no, there's no retention going on with that because there's no active learning involved.

CR: Well, as I've read about it, seized with, with notes on your computer. Students are pretty fast typers and so they can essentially transcribe what, what, what you're dictating as it were. But handwritten notes, no one can write that fast. And I don't think any of our undergraduates know shorthand. So they, they necessarily have to process it. They have to filter, they have to make critical decisions about what to write down because you can't write it all down. And so they're already engaging with the material when they're being exposed to it, rather than just being exposed to it.

RD: They ask more questions when they hand write. They ask you to slow down. As you can tell, I'm a pretty excitable guy here. And I get going. And when they're taken laptop notes, they just, it just zooms on. But you know, when I'm talking and their writing they wait, don't, don't go on, and I'm delighted for them to do that. Yeah. That is never a burden. Stop me every time.

CR: Another thing you mentioned, too, that has significant research backing is fewer words on the PowerPoint.

RD: Oh, yes.

CR: So I don't I don't know if you just came to that by by your own experience, trial and error. But there's good research on that too, that says 20 words or less, you should be shooting for that.

RD: The other thing is, don't read the damn laptop, the PowerPoint. And then after you've read them the PowerPoint, don't give them a copy of the PowerPoint.

CR: Making it really, really easy for them to, to wonder why, why did I come to class if if all of that is just going to be given to me?

RD: Yeah.

CR: So where do you see your own areas perhaps, as you're thinking in the future, your areas of growth or further development or experimentation in teaching?

RD: Well, certainly the transition to digital has transformed a lot of things. I've been forced to learn how to work Zoom. And once this is all over, and, dear God, I believe it will be in another year or two, and I go back to live teaching, I will use Zoom more because I never dreamed that all these people would love to talk to my class. Important people. People, just never would have thought that we could afford to get here. If you ask would you like to Zoom with my class at 3:30 on Thursday. They say yeah more often than not. I'm going to bring in more of that. I'm realizing that this obsession in the state of Texas with testing for for high school kids and kids under them has been one of the most colossal failures in the history of education in every level.

But the first thing that was damaged was the ability to write, because writing for the test is a kind of writing that you will never use again other than to pass this test. So I've had to add more and more lectures to strip away all that and start them back with basic declarative sentences. And the kids are delighted. They hate that kind of writing, it's what makes a lot of them not want to go into writing. This writing for the test style, which I don't know where it came from, but it's not English, if not journalism, it's not nothing. It's not academic. It's not anything. So I've had to take out lectures on the backend to spend more. And I know that's frustrating for the kids who arrive able to write. And so I try to keep it as engaging as possible by having some of them being able to move at their own pace and then move into more interviews sooner and more note-taking. Because the, the interview and then the organization of the interview is at the heart of all of this. And if you can do that, man, the law school is just dying for kids who can do that. Because you're going to spend 97% of your time in law writing and researching, and less than 3%, either in the courtroom, actually less than 1% in the courtroom, and the other 2% meeting clients. So if you can write, that's great and to write, you need to organize, take the interviews, information and organize it and present it in a timely fashion. So that's changing. It's not that the kids are less smart, it's just that they have less. So the A students are still A students on there. It just takes a little longer to get some of them up to that level. And that took a while, for me to realize. I was doubting my own teaching there a little bit, at the beginning, when they were just not catching some of this as quickly. And it's, they're not catching it as quickly because they've never seen some of it before.

CR: Yeah. Well, I think you're articulating what probably no one gets named master teacher without, without, without this trait is the ability to, to shift and to make changes and to teach, teach the students that we have and not the students that we wish we had.

RD: Or the ones we had a long time ago.

CR: Right, yeah. The ones of yesteryear. Yeah. Oh, great. We're about at time here. Is there anything, any final thoughts or words you want to leave us with?

RD: Well, I have myself a little piece of paper with eight words on it to make sure I covered all these eight words. Uh. Sense of humor. And I, I've had students write down their attributes of the best teacher, you'll notice that they don't care if that teacher's hard or not, that is not an issue. What's an issue is, do you care about the kids? Do you love what you're teaching? And funny enough, humor shows up a lot. So I laugh at myself a lot, you know, I'm old, fat, white guy, 66, who has been immersed in black gospel music for 40 years. Which means a lot of funny things have happened. And if you get into their lives, they love to tell you the ludicrous, the funny, the strange things that are going on. And like you said earlier, it humanizes all of us. The teachers. I loved laughed long and laughed hard. The churches I go, loved going to, there's laughter before, during and after the services. And in the classes where there's no laughter, no joy, I can sense them down the hall. They are like dead zones. So don't be afraid to make yourself look foolish if it shows that you care.

CR: That's fantastic.

RD: Good.



CR: Alright, I think that's a good note to end on.

RD: All right. We'll do it.

CR: All right. Robert Darden, thank you for joining us. We really appreciate your time and your insights.

RD: Thank you Chris, it's good to be here.

CR: Our thanks again to Professor Robert Darwin for speaking with us today. You can check out our show notes for links on some of the topics we discussed, including research, effective PowerPoints, and student note-taking by hand. That's our show. Join us next time for *Professors Talk Pedagogy*.