

2001 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

Jane Caputi, Ph.D.

Professor of Women's Studies

Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

To begin, I would like to thank my parents, who made the higher education of every one of their eight children, the first six of whom were girls, their priority and with whom I continue to have many rewarding intellectual and political conversations – including about this speech. I also thank my colleagues in Women's Studies – Josephine Beoku Betts, Debbie Covino, Leslie Terry -- and our former Director Dorothy Leland as well as the members of the Search Committee, who were my first and most favorable contact with FAU four years ago. I thank the students on the selection committee and, of course, I thank the students who nominated me for this award and who have challenged me, inspired me and poured their imaginative participation into the classes we have had together: Maria Rossel, J.D. Checkit, Mintra Vlamynck, Judy Castro, Erika Waddel, Michele Windfelder, Andy Sturzen and others I will refer to as I go on.

When I first realized that one of the consequences of receiving this award meant that I had to give a speech, I behaved like 99 percent of my undergraduates – panic. It is one thing to give a lecture in an educational context – quite another to imagine what you might have to say in a forum such as this. But as I pondered my dilemma, I thought about that inexplicable though often verifiable nugget of popular wisdom – that, if you are receptive, the solution often presents itself to you in the events of your everyday life.

I will first say that my everyday experience at FAU has left me sometimes tired but never bored. There is an exceptionally rich, challenging and diverse intellectual life here – an extraordinary array of speakers, conferences, art exhibits, music and theater – as well as the dynamic programs in which I participate – the Women's Studies undergraduate certificate and M.A. program and the Comparative Studies Ph.D. program. Just this year students and I participated in three conferences sponsored by FAU – the Disney Conference, the Southeast Women's Studies Association Conference and the Caribbean Festival. I recount these factors because an award such as this necessarily represents a mutual effort, most obviously between students and teacher but also between the teacher, her colleagues and her context, as I hope to show throughout this talk.

As I was wondering how I would frame my remarks, I received an email from Carlos Nelson in the Library – whom many of us know for exceptional reference help. Mr. Nelson had attended a plenary presentation I made at our recent Women’s Studies conference and most graciously sent me a note complimenting the session and indicating that my talk included what he called the three main elements of education: information, affirmation and inspiration. I thought – aha – I can work with this. Though I will add one element to the mix – imagination.

Let’s start with **information** – We often think of information as “just the facts.” And indeed it is factual, but it is more than that. *Inform* means both etymologically as well as in definition to shape one’s inner world – to “form the mind as to character and disposition.” It also means quite simply – “to communicate knowledge.” This question of forming and informing is at the heart of the educational process. Currently, there is a debate between two supposedly opposed approaches – fact-based learning and critical thinking. To have knowledge, to be educated, you must employ both. Information is food for intellectual growth. Information needs to be gathered copiously and then chewed over carefully and critically, digested into knowledge. *Critical* is from a Latin root that means to judge or discern. My goal as a teacher is to communicate knowledge in ways that do not work solely to form the mind but also strive to catalyze the mind to discern information’s value, truth and power.

Alan Berger, Raddock Eminent Scholar and Chair of Holocaust Studies, in an article on the implications of the Holocaust for the academy, questions the emphasis of the modern university with its stress on value-free performance and technical proficiency. He argues that “the murder of the Jews in the heart of Western Culture shattered all interpretive categories and requires new modes of teaching and learning, a transformation of the educational enterprise itself.” Women’s Studies is one of the fields of that has emerged out of this ongoing transformation of the educational enterprise. Feminist scholarship, including my own, frequently challenges the often unquestioned and even unnoticed frames for knowledge through which we normally perceive the world – e.g., dualistic and hierarchical power relations. Simultaneously, it often examines, unearths and centers texts, themes, experiences and philosophies that are otherwise marginalized.

I take these approaches in my classes because I believe that we grow as thinkers when we acquire the critical tools to reflect on how our ideas and values have come to be ours, when we are able to subject our own systems of thought to

scrutiny, when we examine issues and narratives from a variety of perspectives and standpoints not necessarily our own.

Many students give evidence that they experience this type of critical thinking as a boon, a gift. I experienced that gift originally in the classrooms of feminist philosopher and theologian Mary Daly when I was an undergraduate at Boston College. Creative and critical thinking, as she manifested it, became **play** in the best sense of that word. Daly herself coined a new phrase to describe it: “ludic cerebrations” – intellectual joy and celebration.

In my classes, I often ask students to look critically at the images that flow by us in everyday life, for example, advertising imagery. Recently, we found a disturbing negation of the play of critical thinking in an ad for a portable CD player that appeared a few months ago in the magazine *Young Miss*. A blandly pretty young white woman gazes upward. She looks utterly enthralled. Embedded into her forehead is a play button, just like you would find on a recording machine. Curiously, while she is imaged in black and white, the play button is shown in color. All vitality is given to the machine. As I read this ad, this young woman cannot think or imagine on her own. Her thought process is on “hold” if not “stop” while someone else’s tape “plays” in her mind.

Critical thinking allows students to talk back to and with the forces that inform them. Critical education aims at encouraging active and original participation in the ongoing conversation that produces and sustains our democratic and pluralistic culture.

The second facet of education is: **Affirmation** – *Affirm* means to validate or to confirm – to state as true. It also means to state truths gained through instruction, study, research and experience.

Affirm means also to say yes. We say yes to our students when we recognize them as growing selves, when we listen deeply and respectfully to each other and when we affirm that an educational environment of diversity, including students, professors and administrators from varying backgrounds, contributes greatly to the educational enterprise. Last Friday, writing in *The New York Times* in support of affirmative action, Ronald Dworkin reminded us that universities have long insisted that diversity of all kinds has educational value, for example by seeking students from different geographical areas, cultures and social backgrounds, because academic discussion is most profitable and has the most lasting social benefits when it draws on different experiences and perspectives.

My 18 years of teaching utterly confirms the validity of this proposition. Not only are my classrooms more of a learning environment for students, but for me as well. Because of diversity in the classroom, and in the scholarly, artistic and intellectual communities, I have grown in ways that might not otherwise have been possible – as an educator and researcher, and, also, I hope, as a person. When the classroom has students who represent differing class backgrounds, ethnicities and sexual preferences, our world expands. When we listen to others with different life experiences and perspectives, we mentally travel. We walk the proverbial mile in another's moccasins, and are enriched and often beneficially transformed.

Another way of accomplishing affirmative education is to make the academy a place in which women, people of multiple religions and ethnicities, lesbians and gay men, and non-Western peoples can be seen and heard, dealt with not only as subjects for study but as originators of culture, knowers, artists, theorists.

In her work on the Gullah culture, Josephine Beoku Betts uncovers traditions of knowledge and resistance where others, looking only through standard interpretive categories, might notice only women's domestic work. She discovers that women's food traditions "devise and transmit alternative ways of understanding their culture by relying on African-derived systems of knowledge, which promote motherhood, women-centered networks, self-reliance, extended family and community-centeredness."

In a graduate Women's Studies seminar this semester, we read Robert Bork's *Slouching Toward Gomorrah* and debated his assertion that "Contrary to the claims of the multiculturalists, there are not different ways of knowing. There is one way and, though it is accessible to people of all cultures, it had its origins, or at least was brought to its fullest development, in Europe."

For Bork, objective rationality epitomized by a trained elite is the only way of knowledge, and other ways are to be regarded with suspicion and ignominy. Yet we impoverish our minds and souls when we do not recognize multiple ways of knowing – for example, ways rooted in the imagination and the emotions, ways rooted in empathy and closeness as well as ways that favor distance and rationality, ways that come out of our own traditions and ways that come out of differing cultural experiences.

Nobel-Prize-winning author Toni Morrison asks us to look closely at the politics of what she calls "discredited knowledge." She claims that the knowledge of

Black people was discredited because Black people were enslaved and colonized and therefore what they knew was discredited. Discreditation can take place through pejorative labeling, and Morrison provocatively argues that many of Black people's ways of knowing have been discredited by classifying them as "superstition and magic."

Magic is an especially relevant concept for educators. Professor Bill Covino, with whom I taught a Ph.D. class last spring, points to the ways that magic is very much alive in the rhetorical process. As he understands it, magic can be either generative or arresting; it can release or bind energy, make things move or petrify them, energize them or bring them to a dead stop. Words are magical in that they "make real things happen . . . and the rhetor [and, I would add, teacher or student] performs magic by effecting real action; in the event that any of us employ powerful words to change a situation, or are ourselves changed by what we read or hear, we participate in a magical transactive transformation."

Good magic takes place in the classroom when energy is released, when leaps of the imagination abound, when students move toward the realization of their potential. Reading over students' letters supporting me for this award, I found evidence of what they value in an education. From Kristine Wagoner: Classroom theories and texts that become "relevant to so many aspects of my education and life in general." From Michelle Canning: Subject matter and discussion that "help me to grow as an individual, opening my mind to new knowledge and experience . . . and challenging me to recognize my own potential as a future scholar." From Penny Young-Robinson -- material that "relates to students of all races, religions and genders." Suzanne Kelly stresses the "fostering of a critical, independent and confident thinking student body"; Shireen Lalla: "commitment and inspiration"; Marianne Martinez appreciates "a teacher's "enthusiasm for receiving new or contrary opinions." Holly Larson wants classes that remind us "of the importance of our responsibility of and active participation in the act of knowing;" Josh Pearlman highlights approaches that make "learning exciting," that speak to, as Sandy Korn put it, "originality and inventiveness" – which brings me to my third element of education – the imagination.

Imagination

I started out this talk by referring to the significance of everyday events. Right now, a major event in all of our lives is the controversy over academic freedom that has been occasioned by the campus production of the play "Corpus Christi."

I am delighted that I have this opportunity to thank President Catanese and his administration publicly for their courageous support of this principle.

A 1990 policy statement from the American Association of University Professors unequivocally links freedom and the imagination. As “essential as freedom is for the relation and judgment of facts, it is even more indispensable to the imagination. In our judgment, academic freedom in the creation and presentation of works in the visual and performing arts, by ensuring greater opportunity for imaginative exploration and expression, best serves the public and the academy.”

Precisely how does imaginative expression serve us? I will turn here to insights gleaned from papers written by FAU students. Fran Chelland, a Ph.D. student in the Comparative Studies program, credits the empathic imagination as a necessary way of knowledge in her paper, “Education After Auschwitz,” which she wrote for a class with Alan Berger. She writes: “To imagine is to conceive of that which is not immediately present to the senses. It is our way into worlds that exist beyond our immediate experience or borders. To believe in the content of the imagination is to believe it is possible to gain insight into a reality other than our own, it is to believe it possible to think/feel/intuit our way into the reality of the “other” – the not-self, and the reality of the unseen.” Attempting to understand the matter at hand from the point of view of the “other” is essential to any responsible act of theory, assertion, criticism and judgment and is ultimately most rewarding. Although we now are embroiled in controversy and great diversity of opinion, we can recognize that this is also a time of opportunity – for dialogue, imaginative understanding and cooperatively seeking a route to harmonize that diversity, while reserving our differences.

Other facets of the imagination also come to bear on academic freedom. The creative writer and thinker Gloria Anzaldúa came to FAU this semester as a visiting scholar in the Comparative Studies Ph.D. program. Anzaldúa speaks of the imagination as one’s “creative self,” one’s “creative unconscious.” One of the Women’s Studies M.A. students, Ceti Boundy, in a paper she presented at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference in Boston last summer, conceives of the creative imagination as allowing us to unify realms of knowledge, experience and consciousness that have been unfairly fragmented – destroying connection and empathy, encouraging objectification and narrowing our minds. Citing the Sondheim musical “Into the Woods,” Ms. Boundy takes “going into the woods” as a metaphor for the imagination. The fairy tale protagonist often must venture into the Woods, confronting the Witch, the Wolf

and the Giant, in order to gain experience and knowledge. Going into the Woods requires freedom, daring and courage. It means encountering the Strange, the standpoints and experiences of others, as well as the depths of one's own creative unconscious. Going into the Woods means thinking in unconventional ways, and being open to possibilities for growth and transformation. Teresa Brennan, the Schmidt College Eminent Scholar, argues that habitual thinking in the conventional categories forges pathways in the brain. While these pathways are useful and enable us to learn from experience, they are forged through the binding of energies, and an over reliance on them -- and a corresponding neglect of other possible ways (including ways of knowledge) -- can inhibit growth. Taking that meandering walk into the woods unbinds energies and frees us to imagine, to empathize, to create and to contribute to the becoming of a more just, ethical and harmonious, though inherently and necessarily, diverse world.

The last element of education I want us to consider is **inspiration**. Inspire – think of respiration-- is from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning both breath and spirit. *Inspire* means quite literally to breathe life into – to fill with spirit – to enliven, animate, energize.

When I was interviewed by the student committee for this award, one of the first questions I was asked concerned my motivation for teaching. I surprised myself by answering that teaching was a spiritual activity for me. I had to go home and think further about what I meant. Exploring ways of knowledge, and encouraging the creative imagination, empathic understanding and justice is a powerful responsibility. Teaching is a vocation. Our work is not merely to inform, but to create a climate that encourages the growth of our students' spirits or souls along with their intellects, and, of course, our own as well. We do this by being respectful, by being truthful, by being willing to be challenged, by being attentive, by speaking to the spirit—the creative unconscious -- and by recognizing the potential for brilliance in each student. We do it, most importantly, by furthering an atmosphere of free inquiry and expression.

The creative imagination is a green breath of Inspiration. It is the psychological engine of human growth, but, like love, it thrives only in an atmosphere of freedom; it vanishes in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Think about it. When we are afraid, we stop breathing. Our guts clench. Our throats constrict; we cannot speak. When we are afraid -- that our art, our research, the texts we teach or the speakers we invite to campus – and let me be clear – the condition always is that we do these things not arbitrarily or with malice or calumny but out of academic integrity – yet when we do act with that academic integrity but

have to fear that we will be judged dangerous or immoral to those with the power to approve – or disapprove-- funding, to censor, to imprison— as happens in many parts of the world – we **stop**. We stop creating, we stop teaching, we stop learning, we stop being inspired and we stop inspiring. Without academic freedom there would be no distinguished teaching.

This award is most meaningful to me because its determination is wholly within the hands of students – the people to whom I am most responsible. When I first mentioned this award to Gloria Anzaldúa she enthusiastically congratulated me but at the same time reminded me that it is not really about me. And she is right. What this award *is* about is an affirmation of the type of critical, imaginative, passionate and inspiring education I have been describing. This award is clear evidence that this type of education-- that I and many others here and at other universities around this country offer-- is deeply desired by many, many of our students. By naming me for this Distinguished Teaching award, students thank FAU for keeping the doors open to critical inquiry, growth and imaginative traveling. And I thank the students for that, as well as for this award, with all my heart.