

Why I Teach

Looking back over your years at Thiel College, what do you remember most? The buildings and facilities? The cafeteria? If you're like most Thiel alumni, what you remember most fondly is the people—the people you lived with, the people you played sports with or performed on stage with, and especially the people who stood in front of your classroom every day, advised your path through college (and life) or simply listened to what you had to say. You know why your professors were so important to you, but do you know why you (and their current students) are so important to them? Read on as a few of Thiel's professors share why teaching at the College is such an important part of their lives...



*Dr. David Buck**Associate Professor of History*

I teach for those moments of understanding. I find it especially pleasing when a student comes to see something in a new light. I like the fact that someone's world might be opened a little bit by what I do. At the same time, I like the fact that my world is constantly changed by my students and colleagues. Another reason I teach is because I enjoy learning and trying new things. For example, I have taught my First-Year Seminar, "The Sixties," class the past two years. I had never really tie-dyed shirts. I figured that I had a small budget and wanted to give the students something to remember the class. I designed a shirt with a peace symbol and started researching how to tie-dye. We finished the semester by tie-dying our shirts as the final exam. When I started planning this semester's class, I decided to have the "final exam" during orientation. This was a different experience for me and helped my class to get to know each other better at the start of the semester. Another reason I am in love with teaching is the fact that my profession allows me to experience change on a daily basis.

*Jennifer Curry, M.B.A.**Lecturer of Mathematics and Computer Science*

Looking back to my childhood, it seems I was always a teacher. My friends always came to me for help with their homework. When we played school, I was always the teacher. In high school and college, there was more of the same. I would get calls from people at 10 or 11 o'clock at night saying things to the effect: "Jenn, how do you do..." I remember sitting in the stairway of a lecture hall helping a classmate with accounting or economics after class. Even before all that, when my mother asked me if I wanted to go to preschool, I was so excited! But, for better or worse, I ignored these natural tendencies and majored in accounting. It seemed the most logical path for me to take; I am good at math and accountants get good jobs, right?

After I graduated and after some "fun" working in retail and as a paralegal, I decided to go back to doing what I do best—school. I went to a campus of Penn State Erie, The Behrend College and completed my M.B.A. I soon was hired as a classroom assistant at the local



vocational-technical school. Spending time with the students in and out of the classroom was so enjoyable. My rapport with them was excellent and some of them even came to me with personal issues. I loved it; I had found my calling. Unfortunately, funding got cut along with my job. I went to work at the county jail as the criminal records specialist. Although this job had its good moments, I couldn't shake that desire to get back into the classroom.

Penn State Shenango in Sharon, Pa., is near where I live. I thought I'd send them a letter to see if I could teach there. After procuring a couple of letters of recommendation, I wrote a letter and waited. I called the dean's secretary probably too often, but I was so anxious that I couldn't help it. Finally, while on vacation, I was told that they could use me to teach two business classes in the fall. Well, that only lasted for one semester, but that was okay. I soon after got hired at Kent State's Trumbull campus to teach business law and that lead to other business classes there. I had to take a couple of side jobs since adjunct pay is horrible almost everywhere, but I didn't care. I would take pictures of screaming babies if that's what it took, and I did.

My mother was concerned about the insecurity of my position, not to mention the lack of money. She saw an ad in the local paper that Thiel needed an adjunct for developmental mathematics. I didn't think I would get hired, but I sent in my vita and letter of interest. I got a call for an interview. Thiel is where I got my bachelor's degree, so walking back on campus was like an eight-track flashback. My interview was in an office suite surrounded by five faculty members, four of whom I remembered from my student days. I don't recall the entire interview, but I do remember the department chair asking me why I wanted to teach math.

My reply came straight from the heart; I hadn't even given it any real thought. I said that I love math because it never changes and that makes me feel happy. Two plus two will always be four. I also told them about how I have always been a teacher. The department chairperson walked me out after the interview and told me that, as far as he was concerned, I was hired. He even took my picture for the Web site. I was so excited and terrified at the same time. After five years as an adjunct, I was promoted to a full-time lecturer. I soon discovered that I wouldn't rather teach any other subject at any other place in the known universe (and still feel that way).

When I first began teaching introductory and college algebra, I didn't know that I was also taking so many people with me—my teachers from preschool through my M.B.A., my parents and grandparents, my brother, my friends. I also clearly now recognize two other people who are in the classroom with me. One is my high school English teacher who was very good at keeping his cool (most of the time). I draw on my image and memories of him to help me keep my cool as well (most of the time). I also bring in my accounting professor from undergraduate studies in some of his physical mannerisms and ways of speaking. My high school English teacher also was pivotal for me in that he was the first teacher whom I thought allowed me to express my own opinions as long as I could back them up. This, I think, was my first taste of a kind of academic freedom. I am very careful to listen and allow students to express their thoughts, feelings and opinions.

I hope to stay at my current position for as long as I can wield a piece of chalk while continuing to learn from my students, my colleagues, continued classroom learning and

of course, myself. I have found my bliss and am grateful for that and try to embrace it every day.

Natalie Dorfeld, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of English

I began my undergraduate career in 1994 at Slippery Rock University. Like many college freshmen, I didn't have the slightest clue what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. It seemed to change on a weekly basis. I did, however, have three steadfast loves—writing, the college atmosphere and extreme sports.

Sometime later, one of my English professors wrote "See me" at the bottom of my essay. I assumed that meant something negative, so I avoided him like the plague. He finally cornered me next to the snack machine and said, "Dorfeld, you write very well. Your run-on sentences scare me a bit, but you have a lot of potential. What's your major?"

Fast forwarding 10 years and 10 thousand essays later, I earned my Ph.D. in English. And much to my delight, I was able to retain my initial loves from my freshmen year. So, why do I teach?

I have always loved writing and the art of storytelling. Every semester, I look forward to reading my offbeat essays in *Oral & Written Expression*, which range from how to entertain a 103-year-old woman to surviving grizzly bear attacks. It's like getting paid to eat fried ice cream, and that doesn't seem like work at all.

Secondly, college campuses are never stagnant. On any given week, you can see a play, take in a funky art show, listen to a renowned speaker or embark on a cultural

fieldtrip with classmates. I've also interacted with individuals from every background and nationality imaginable. This gentle momentum, always learning and being exposed to new experiences, is very rewarding, and I never take it for granted.

As for the extreme sports, I'm not sure how well that fits into the English professor stereotype, but I can attest that the flexible teaching schedule has permitted me to see and do things that I have only read about as a child. I skied the mighty Matterhorn in Switzerland and wrangled sand sharks in Hawaii. Not only do my tales from far-away lands give my students hours (minutes) of enjoyment, they allow me to become a better, more invigorated professor.

If I could give any advice to college freshmen, it would be to find what you love to do, and figure out a way to make money off of it. I chose teaching, or perhaps it chose me, and I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Mary Theresa Hall, Ph.D.

Professor of English

"And gladly wolde [s]he lerne and gladly teche." Medieval author Geoffrey Chaucer used these words to describe the Oxford Student in *The Canterbury Tales*. I've always found an affinity with Chaucer: his adventurous spirit, his ability to accept human nature as it is and to describe personalities with such accuracy and vigor that his 30 pilgrims have become an ineffable part of my life and, I hope, the lives of many of my students over the past 34 years that I have been privileged to be a teacher.

Why do I teach? I teach because I relish the teacher-student exchange that occurs in the classroom, a place that I consider sacred space where magic occurs. For me, the classroom is the intersection of the sacred and the magical, where preparedness meets mystery and surprise. When students experience their own "Aha!" moment—when James Joyce's epiphanic moment becomes a reality for them; when they are proud of themselves for mastering difficult and challenging literary terminology and concepts, ways of interpreting the literature and, in so doing, life itself; when they eventually become comfortable enough with themselves and each other to express their own ideas about the works and to take a stand on an issue that may be very different from what the critics or I think; when authors come alive and "interact" with us in the classroom, challenging our 21st-century ideas and ways of being in the world with their own understanding of life; when

assignments that seem overwhelming melt and fade the margins of the impossible and move toward knowledge and self-definition—then the magic occurs and does not stop since all of us in the classroom are both learners and teachers simultaneously.

The privilege of teaching, especially in a liberal arts college, is both vocation and profession. I teach because of the "existential inability to do otherwise." I teach because I had a Chaucer professor at my undergraduate liberal arts college who was one of the first female students to graduate in English from Harvard University and who instilled in me the spirit that there is nothing that a prepared mind and a hard-working spirit cannot master. I want to pass along that legacy to my students. And the story continues, from one generation to the next...To awaken each day and anticipate meeting Geoffrey Chaucer and his pilgrims in the faces of my students and colleagues—what could be richer and more exciting!

Douglas R. Hazlett, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Education

I start every class that I teach by saying to my students, "You might teach one of my daughters some day, so hold on to your seats, because here we go!" I am lucky enough to be in a profession that makes a difference in the lives of others every single day. I am especially lucky enough to teach enthusiastic undergraduate students who hope to teach kindergarten through 12th-grade students someday. (With regard to my initial comment, my daughters—Emily and Megan—have already experienced our Thiel students as part of Thiel field placements as well as Thiel graduates hired by their school district.)

It is fun and exciting to contribute in preparing the next generation of school teachers. I know in my heart that many Thiel education majors will make a difference in the lives of school children. In fact, here are selected comments from Thiel graduates:

"I never knew that something could be so stressful, yet so rewarding at the same time. The stress is in the long hours of planning, while the reward is knowing that I made a difference in a child's life. All of the long hours that I have put in (and will put in) are well worth it. I could not have chosen a better career."
—Tessa Lockovich '09, *Oakview Elementary School, West Middlesex Area School District, long-term substitute.*



Dr. Natalie Dorfeld (on left)

“My goal going into my first day as a teacher was to establish a comfortable classroom environment where students would be able to learn and express themselves. I was able to intertwine first day of school procedures with activities that got students interacting with each other to create an interesting and positive start to the year.”—*Mark Thompson '09, Hickory High School, Hermitage School District, math teacher.*

“Well, I have been in the school for a few weeks now, and it has been absolutely amazing to be in the school and with the kids. I am really glad to be here. Mercer is such a wonderful school district. Everyone is so nice and helpful and they are always open to new ideas and programs.”—*Jennifer Wilfong '09, Mercer Elementary School, Mercer Area School District, AmeriCorps teacher.*

“As a first-year teacher, I have been extremely busy. I am doing so well and absolutely love my job. Because of my professors at Thiel College, I feel comfortable with the latest instructional strategies, relating theory to practice in a classroom setting and using new inventive resources. I am proud to say that I am a second-grade teacher at Rockland Elementary.”—*Heidi (Snyder) Neely, formerly Heidi Snyder '09, Rockland Elementary School, Cranberry Area School District, second-grade teacher.*

As you can see from the above comments, it is a joy to work with our Thiel education majors and this is why I teach.

Patrick Hecking
Professor of Physics

One of the most distinguishing features of humanity—in contrast to animals—is the ability to transmit knowledge and skills from one individual to another by teaching. While primates and mammalian predators and to a lesser degree birds can do this as well, the extent of teaching is something special to our species. Teaching occurs naturally between parents and children, in formal or informal schooling, and frequently between peers as well. Pretty much any individual is capable of teaching some other individual something of value. Teaching is one of the most uniquely human activities.

It is true that much can be learned through and from other sources of information, such as books, television and a variety of digital media. However, learning by all these means has to be predated by teaching children to speak and read. And let's not forget, that for



millennia humankind has managed to pass on information without books and computers, just by speaking, listening and example.

While the above-mentioned media are invaluable in our technological era, they are still no complete substitute for human interaction. This adds the intangible but all-important touch of individuality to the mere absorption of knowledge. Jokes, story-telling, a bit of personal information, opinion (perhaps even biased) and individual interpretation, they all lighten up the classroom and add life to otherwise somewhat bloodless and abstract instruction. We are hardwired by our genes to learn from people and not from machines. Even in digital media, there are often narration and videos of teachers, which means human interaction after all. True, the teacher is not physically present in the classroom, but he or she is visible and/or audible, and this is what counts.

Now, I am a physicist, and this is a somewhat bookish course of study as opposed to, let's say, the fine arts or the languages. Yet some of my most memorable moments as a student occurred in the classroom. I saw a demonstration of the critical point of a gas. The professor heated a sealed bottle of a liquid with a hairdryer (probably borrowed from his wife). Droplets of liquid took off on their own and just floated in the gas, because they had the same density as the gas. It looked like magic, and I watched in awe. Another of these moments was an explanation why a particle in a box behaves very different from a free one. The professor—with high drama—drew a chalk line across the board. It was a large classroom, and

the line was about 50 feet long. A straight, flat line, interrupted by a small wiggle. However, the flat line was an all-important contribution to the system. Nothingness turned into significance. It is 40 years ago, but I remember it more vividly than my first kiss, honest...

That you can't do on a computer, and that's why I teach.

Dr. James Koshan
Associate Professor of History

Teaching is an art as well as a science, and students remain at its core. A student-centered class is one in which a stimulating learning environment is created for the benefit of all participants; where the instructor is organized and can clarify key points and explain difficult information in comprehensible terms. High expectations and challenging material are balanced with positive guidance on a consistent basis to help students achieve success.

To enable students to think independently, they must be prepared with basic skills and information. Yet understanding and retention are not developed through factual knowledge alone, but will only flourish in an atmosphere of critical thinking and reasoning, the very foundation of a liberal arts education. Learning seems to have greater significance for students when they achieve on their own; thus effective instruction actively engages students' minds by emphasizing constant inquiry and continual discovery.

There are critical differences between being taught, and becoming educated. Overall I desire to foster a “love of learning” for my

students that will last well beyond their college years; life is a perpetual learning process. That is why it is important to provide students with the intellectual tools necessary to answer their own questions long after their formal education is complete. A person's "quality of life" and active participation in society are dependent upon this continued quest for self-realization. That is why I teach.

Chris Moinet, Ph.D.
Professor of English

I guess on some level I teach because I was born into it. Both of my parents were teachers, and my sister, my only sibling, has a teaching degree. I also married a teacher (what else?), and our youngest son will be certified to teach in a few months. So the academic calendar is almost part of my DNA. Some people believe New Year's Day is in January, but my family has always celebrated it in late August or early September, and we know the year ends after graduation day in the spring. Then comes the blissful, timeless interlude of summer. A respected colleague once told me that the three best reasons for teaching at Thiel were June, July and August; I don't know if those are the best reasons, but they are certainly good ones.

I also teach because it allows me to stay in the small college environment I fell in love with as a freshman nearly four decades ago. I relish the tree-lined walks and old brick buildings, football games on crisp autumn afternoons, and especially the conversations—in classrooms, in offices, in dorm rooms, on campus lawns—as smart people grope their way toward a better understanding of themselves and the world. And the books! I remember looking with awe at the bookshelves that lined my college mentor's office; how could one person have read so much? I can't tell you what a thrill it is to have students stare at my book-crammed office with the same sense of wonder I felt so many years ago. One final point about spending a lifetime on college campuses: I was around 20 years old when I first gazed at my mentor's bookshelves, surrounded at school by hundreds of others of the same age. I've continued to spend the bulk of my time with 20 year olds, and since they never get older, it's easy to forget that I have. It's akin to a fountain of youth; I don't know who that flabby bald guy that stares at me from the mirror is, but when I'm asked my age, I answer the same way I have for decades: "I'm 'around' 20!"

However, the most important reason I teach is the way teaching impacts lives. The great literature I was introduced to as an undergraduate has given me countless hours of delightful entertainment, but more significantly my favorite authors have made me who I am; without Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, among others, I'd be a very different and much less contented person. I love helping students find the ideas and stories that will serve as touchstones for their futures, perhaps altering, forever and for better, the ways in which they will interact with the world. I know from personal experience that education has that kind of power, and I'm both gratified and honored to have the opportunity to introduce that power to others.

Laurie J. Moroco, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Communication

Teaching in the field of communication is an honor and a gift granted to me by those who believe in my philosophies and trust in my abilities as an instructor. In appreciation, it is my responsibility to instill wisdom in future marketplace professionals and academic scholars to the best of my ability using practical experience and scholarly insight. I feel deep gratitude to have the opportunity to sharpen minds and facilitate students to become contributing members in their communities.

One of the rewards of teaching in higher education is students who genuinely want to be in my classroom and have a vested interest in their education. They want to learn, to better themselves and prepare themselves for their roles in life. Providing students with the theoretical background necessary to inform the practical experience needed as a marketplace professional is my responsibility. I aim to provide communication with theory-informed action as an underpinning for public and private communication in a variety of settings. I want to help them develop the skills they need to excel in communication and related fields because the knowledge generated in my classroom can be carried over into their personal and professional lives.

In addition, through my instruction, I would like for my students to develop an appreciation of the liberal arts. The benefits gained from the liberal arts can cultivate a sense of responsibility for one's own behavior, improve self-esteem and/or confidence, and provide preparation for jobs and careers. I hope for them to gain basic academic success skills,



liberal arts and academic values, and personal development. I do not administer a prescriptive list for success. What I do offer is theory-informed action in hopes of challenging my students to think critically and analytically, to challenge them to improve their communication competence and to have an understanding of the concepts and metaphors pertinent to the field of communication. Providing a forum to talk about ideas is important as I guide the students to their own conclusions. I encourage dialogic communication and ask that they be prepared for discussions and class sessions.

When my students leave the classroom at the end of the semester I want them to feel that they have benefited from my teaching. I hope that my scholarship in the field of communication brings to light new concepts that they have never considered. And I hope to provide clarity for ideas they may have encountered but did not understand. I want my students to be challenged by new material but not frustrated. I want them to think I am fair but challenging. Most importantly, I want them to leave with a positive attitude about the course and about the field of communication in general.

Derek Nelson, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Religion

Here's a far-too-grandiose theory regarding the purpose of education: if civilization as we know it were to end tomorrow, and one's students were the only ones left to reconstruct it, then education exists to equip them in that task.

Now, that's probably too sweeping a claim for a rationale as to why I teach—but not by much.

The students who fill my classes will long outlive me. They'll make decisions—in their churches, in their voting booths, with their wallets and with their time—that will shape the civilization that I'll try not to complain about when I'm old.

Teaching is, in some ways, a selfish act. We want for our particular slant on history, on literature, on philosophy to be accepted. Many of us teachers are used to speaking our minds and having others write down and often assent to our thoughts. When we enter contexts where that doesn't happen, we're sometimes grumpy. Attending even one faculty meeting will make that obvious.

But beyond its selfish moment, teaching is also self-giving. We give ourselves as exemplars (hopefully) of how to think out loud with reason and dignity. We give our time as tokens of our own selves, in an effort to help students and colleagues become the fuller, freer-thinking citizens into whose care we can confidently commend ourselves and those about whom we care.

Teaching, then, is inherently future-oriented. The best teachers are those whose visions for the future—the futures of their students, the future of their school, of their country—are the richest and most compelling. This is true even for teachers who, like me, spend most of their mental time in centuries long since past. To teach well is to imagine richly while remembering rightly. And if it can be at least a little bit fun along the way, so much the better.

I have been asked in the past what I most like to teach. And my slightly impertinent answer is never a course title or even a subject area. My favorite thing to teach isn't a "thing" at all. It's students. In imagining a different future, or remembering differently the same past, students teach me, too.

Judith Newton

*Professor of Mathematics and
Computer Science*

I didn't know at an early age that I wanted to become a teacher. I was more involved in playing tetherball or reading Archie comic books. I did know I liked school and the activities that consumed each school day. I felt good when I could successfully answer a question or when I learned something new. Before Thanksgiving, I loved coloring in the turkey printed on a paper that smelled of ditto solution. That smell still brings back good memories.

Throughout school, my goals were short-term—complete my homework, do some



yard work, watch a favorite TV program. Unfortunately, as I worked my way through college, my goals remained pretty much the same. So when it came time to graduate, I hadn't given any thought to employment. Fortunately, I was able to continue going to school by enrolling in a graduate program in mathematics.

In graduate school, I worked as a teaching assistant. I taught an algebra class. I was able to get through the syllabus successfully. I can't say the same for all of my students. Nevertheless many students gave me positive feedback indicating that I was able to explain things clearly and helped them to understand the material. These reactions made me feel good.

After two short stints as a computer programmer, Professor David Miller offered me a position in Thiel's Business Department. I accepted the position immediately since it involved teaching courses in areas in which I was interested and had expertise. Since I lacked any formal teacher training, I made many mistakes. However, the students handled my initial ineptness with grace. They provided feedback that encouraged me to continue doing what was good and improve on what was lacking.

After 30-some years of teaching, why do I teach? It is because I continue to love going to school and learning new things. The information technology area is ever changing. I must continue learning along with my students. Also it is gratifying to see a student learn new material and then demonstrate mastery of it. I can see in the successful student the

pride and self-confidence that results from their ability to do new and important things. Finally, I feel a sense of pride when I hear back from graduates who have succeeded by building on their experiences at Thiel. I teach because it is a challenging, fulfilling and rewarding career.

Valerie Vernon, M.Ed.

Adjunct Professor of Latin

I teach because I was born to ask questions and not only find answers but find solutions and truth, and I hope to pass this love of questioning on to every student who has been in my classroom. The subjects I've taught range from all levels of Latin to English, including basic writing, speaking and drama. The subject matters not; the premise is the same—ask questions and question the answers. Of course this belief fits best into the subject of philosophy, one of my favorites, but can apply to any class and any situation. I believe we've become complacent even as an intelligent species and we absorb too easily that which we are taught. Whether it is television advertisements, politics, a conversation with a friend or subject matter from a teacher, we believe what we're told and fail to seek out more. As an instructor, I offer what I have learned in the most unbiased manner that I possibly can, then passing on to the next generation my answers and questions in as succinct a fashion as I am capable. After I have done this, I hope my learners will also seek out more—more answers, more solutions, more truths—more than I have.