

The New "Show & Tell"

Virginia Wesleyan professors not only instruct future teachers on how to be successful in today's classrooms, they model vital techniques firsthand

by Kristen De Deyn Kirk

EARLY ON A SPRING AFTERNOON, Allison Mahoney '06 was being pulled in two directions. She was on the phone during her lunch break, reminiscing about her experiences at Virginia Wesleyan College, but a Virginia Beach elementary school teacher needed to check in with her about a student.

"He was great," Mahoney told the teacher. "In the beginning, he shut down. I had a little chat with him, and he really turned it around. He showed me how to do some ladder multiplication; he could explain it better than me!"

In the class where she was substitute teaching, Mahoney had successfully connected with a student who was known to get easily frustrated, so much so that he would disengage and withdraw. She appreciated that one of the teachers who worked with him regularly was concerned about her progress – and she was proud that she didn't need any help. Soon, she will be graduating with her second degree from Wesleyan, first in accounting and now in education through the ACT program (Alternative Certification for Teachers), and she is gaining confidence in her skills.

A few weeks before, another teacher explained what she wanted done in her absence, and she paused as she went through her list.

"Oh, sorry," she said to Mahoney. "I said 'Kagan strategies; you probably don't know what those are.'"

"Well, actually, I *do*," replied Mahoney. "I've studied Kagan (who recommends techniques for students working one-on-one and in small groups to increase participation and lesson mastery)."

She had already practiced "Kagan" and used his methods in classes.

Dr. Malcolm Lively, director of teacher education at Wesleyan, would probably smile if he heard about Mahoney's proud moment. He wants each graduating teacher to have a variety of options when faced with challenges in the classrooms.

Visualize his goal this way: Tool bags.

"I want the teachers to have a wealth of skills and strategies at their disposal," he explained. "Teaching doesn't have to be only memorization and drills. You want to know about different techniques. Maybe you won't use some of them for two or three years, but you will need them all at some point. That's when you'll be prepared, because you'll have studied something that will help your students."

The challenges of teaching have never been easy. Video games, cell phones, and hundreds of television stations make them even harder nowadays, Lively noted. Students' attention spans are shorter, and after all the lights, movement and noise of electronic entertainment, students want excitement. They might not realize it, but they also crave human connection, something that can often be sadly missing from their wired lives.

The keys to drawing the students in: Having knowledge of the material – and knowledge of the person, said Lively.

"Good teachers learn the students' names quickly and what makes them special," he said.

While Lively encourages his future teachers to become connected with their students, he does the same at Wesleyan with his fellow staffers. Fortunately, it's not a difficult task. Professors are often drawn to the College because of the small classes and the chance to interact closely with students. While the exact number of students in each class varies, it's almost always smaller than other colleges.

"Some are only eight or nine," said Lively. "It's always under 20, and usually around 11."

These small classes provide the ideal setting to relate with students and dive into hands-on activities. Lively and his fellow professors teach the way they want their students to eventually teach. Mahoney has always appreciated this fact.

In one class, she was learning about teaching science. The teacher didn't just say "this is what you need to know" and then test that they understood the material. She taught the students the content by constructing different stations and experiments for them to work on. Mahoney and the other students walked away having mastered the science concepts and adding to their file of future lesson plans.

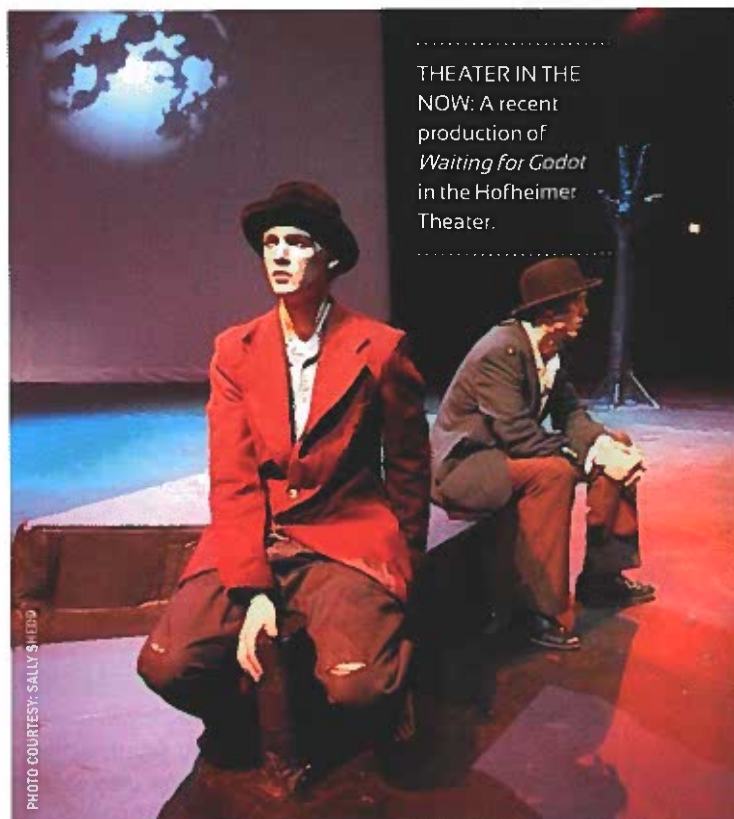
Virginia Corbett '97 had a similar experience at Wesleyan. One of her favorite professors was Karen Bosch, who covered teaching methods.

"She lived what she taught," said Corbett. "Every classroom experience was engaging, and she set a high standard. I also appreciated that she was nurturing and would give you a thumbs up and an 'atta girl' when you did well. Just her presence made me want to do better."

This year, Corbett had a lot of time to think about her education and the work she does now with civics students at Hugo Owens Middle School in Chesapeake, Virginia. She was named teacher of the year at the school and put together a portfolio to compete for the district-wide middle school teacher of the year title. (She won, and was thrilled that Bosch came to the announcement ceremony.) The techniques and tools she uses range from

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Such Stuff As Dreams Are Made On



And perhaps appropriately for a theater that started with a shipwreck, the building has sprung a few leaks. White streaks down the wall at the back corner testify to the water that comes in during heavy rains – filling buckets. The summer before last a massive air conditioner leak soaked the floors.

But improvements are slowly being made. The Hofheimer has vastly upgraded its lighting system in recent years, and Shedd and Thorne want a lighting booth that doesn't have to be accessed by a steep ladder.

"Well loved, well used," says Shedd of the theater. "It is a testament to those that came before, to Dr. Hite and Mr. Anderson and everyone here that we are ready. We're just bursting at the seams in terms of the next step, whatever that's going to be."


And so as the fine arts departments at Wesleyan contemplates the Hofheimer's need for future changes, Chana Ball, who graduated from Wesleyan in 1983, remembers that first transformation.

Ball played Miranda in the 1981 production of *The Tempest*. She remembers the moment when Shakespeare's language suddenly became clear to her, the moment when Hite's encouragement gave her the guts to audition, and the moment when the Hofheimer Theater was transformed into an island.

"I couldn't believe how much things had changed in the theater in those two short weeks," Ball recalls.

It was what I had noticed in 1995: An empty box could become a world.

Hite quotes Prospero, the magician he played in that first production, when he describes what happened in the Hofheimer that night amid the smoke of Anderson's homemade fog machine.

"It was," he says, "such stuff as dreams are made on." 

Elizabeth Blachman is a writer and dancer who grew up running around the campus of Virginia Wesleyan because her mother, Eve Blachman, was a professor of English at the College for 35 years.

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interactive notebooks, puzzles, flipbooks and foldables (multisided panels on which students illustrate or write lessons) to problem-solving challenges, singing, dancing and sign language.

Recently, she asked students to devise a business, decide on its product, and set a price for it. They were graded by their fellow students on the project, and in a roundabout way, by Corbett. She looked at test results to see how well the students had mastered the concepts of different kinds of businesses sole proprietorships, partnerships and corporations.

"Every single student scored 80 percent or higher on that section," she said. "They learned the material."

Reflecting on her career, Corbett identified another way she helps students succeed: Talk.

"Talk time is a must. When I'm at a meeting, I can't just sit there," she said. "So I can't expect my students to do that."

She also likes to talk about herself to students. They know about her life and daily ups and downs with her three children. The students can see her as a real person – and hopefully feel comfortable sharing their lives as well.

"I'm a role model," said Corbett. "I might be the only person who gives some of these students a whole 55 minutes of attention every day. Some go home alone. Their parents have to work two jobs or the mom is home but the dad is deployed."


In addition to being rewarded with two actual teaching awards this year, Corbett also received the best feedback of all: A former student whom she had recommended for a combination 7th and 8th grade program – to catch up after once being held back got in touch with her. She had just been accepted to college.

"She told me 'because you cared a little too much, I'm doing great,'" Corbett said. "She was so smart, and I would tell her that. She needed a challenge, or we would lose her to the system or motherhood. She said 'you never gave up on me.'"

The best teachers don't, says Lively: They strive to lift up their students by keeping themselves and their classrooms fresh.

"I get tired (*from* teaching), but not tired *of* it," he said. "I and all good teachers are always thinking 'what can I do differently?' (to keep things energized). I've done research on teachers, and good ones constantly think about 'what else can I learn?', 'what can I do next time?'"

Lively knows that the teachers graduating from Wesleyan are like that: He recently heard from an experienced math teacher in the Virginia Beach school system who told him that Wesleyan graduates are always nice to work with and effective at teaching.

"The best part was that his feedback was unsolicited," he said. 

Kristen De Deyn Kirk, the daughter and granddaughter of two brilliant teachers, feeds her lifelong commitment to learning by writing and editing for a variety of publications, including an international teachers' magazine. Reach her at www.kristendedeynkirk.com.