Rick Walker, MA Trinity College, BA Fordham College, AA St. Thomas Seminary

Adjunct Professor, Charter Oak State College

**A practical strategy for epistemological engagement of non-traditional learners in an intensive, required, online writing and college research class.**

Stewart Brand, author of *The Whole Earth Catalog* and now the guru of The Long Now Foundationwrites of our era*:*“Civilization is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span. The trend might be coming from the acceleration of technology, the short-horizon perspective of market-driven economics, the next-election perspective of democracies, or the distractions of personal multi-tasking. All are on the increase**.”**

Greetings and welcome. I appreciate the introduction, and I’m very honored to be here today, thank you very much… <http://collegeresearchsharing.com> This is my blog.

I was in the forest on a perfect day Tuesday at Scott Swamp Shade Sanctuary, Farmington, while the distant sound of a piece of heavy machinery with its vehicle alarm penetrating the world of consciousness subsided, and I was watching these tiny, fluorescent blue butterflies flit about. I thought about my grandsons and a book that I often recommend to students, given to me by the woman who heads the Avon Unplugged Learning project, entitled *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder*, by Richard Louv, and I wished the kids could be on the trail, but they’re not nearby. (Separate window… <http://richardlouv.com/books/last-child/> As often happens in the Great Wood, one thought led to another and I then made a mental note to give to my grandson in Newport, finishing first grade, an unabridged first volume of Kipling’s *The Jungle Books*, 1895 with this edition from 1948, a nice original copy. One must be careful after all not to get kids into abridged, condensed, Disneyfied reading else they’ll get bored by fourth grade! Coincidentally for this seminar, in the chapter “The Road-Song of The Bandar-Log” we read a poem, with this third stanza:

All the talk we have ever heard

Uttered by bat or beast or bird –

Hid or fin or scale or feather –

Jabber it quickly and all together!

Excellent! Wonderful! Once again!

Now we are talking just like men.

Does that sound familiar today in what I often call the Age of Information and Distraction? So today we’re going to touch on that and talk about epistemology and ways of knowing today and our intensive, eight-week, required, online Interdisciplinary Studies 101 Cornerstone Seminar on writing and research at Charter Oak State College. (Close Louv and open to… <https://www.charteroak.edu/bb/Syllabi/IDS/IDS_101_printable.cfm> This syllabus is publicly available on the site as you can see.

Before I proceed, I want to warn you that in lieu of a PowerPoint I’ll be clicking on web sites as I build bibliographical references into the presentation. I hope it doesn’t bother you too much! At least it isn’t as onerous as TV today where the images last about one second and make you dizzy! My intent is to lecture for 40 minutes and then we will interact for the remainder of the time. I always feel something is amiss when the presenter doesn’t invite everyone in the room to introduce themselves at the start, so I’d like to do that now, and ask each to not only provide some history but also answer one question. If you could choose one author to use to create an ideal class that you would love to teach more than anything – something that students would read - what would you choose and why? So let’s start at the back…

**As teachers we give hope to students who are increasingly anxious and depressed, and we do so in many different ways depending on the course or major. While so-called “character education” may be a thing of the past, it needs to be revived but this necessitates some understanding of the value of a theory of knowledge, or epistemology. It is human nature to apply what you learn to your life and work. And as I discovered as a consultant years ago to CCSU with its PDS Network “action research” is important for teachers. You need to constantly continue your research and investigate new realms of knowledge, and then apply that immediately in the class.**

**A new Wisconsin Hope Lab study of 10 community colleges across the nation reveals that half of the more than 4,000 community college students surveyed are experiencing a current or recent mental health condition, and less than half of these are receiving any mental health services. There are 11 million students in community colleges and they are our future. Just 20 percent of full-timers complete a credential within 150% of the intended timeframe. Eight years after beginning, 43% are no longer enrolled. (Click on student success at COSC)**

(Click on catalog and President’s intro) While I’m not familiar with all the details of advising and admissions, Charter Oak is renowned since 1973 for assessment of prior work and awarding deserved credits, and our enrollments have been growing because of the convenience of online learning, even though it seems to be more rigorous than the traditional classroom. So while more time is spent in the program, 17 hours a week for my course alone, time is saved by not commuting to a classroom, and this is important. I believe there are some 300,000 citizens in Connecticut who haven’t finished their degrees. We get students of an average age of 37 years old from all walks of life; musicians, historians, engineers, soldiers, police, healthcare specialists, early childhood teachers, and last term I had a professional sports writer and a budding theologian. As a result, it is very important to know how to meet them where they are in the studies and their search for knowledge and engage them so they may continue on successfully and, most importantly as far as my teaching is concerned, give them hope. Realistic hope even if they fail or dropout of the class, and that rate is apparently 18%, but a year ago it was higher. We recently revised the course. This diversity is a strength, but can also be a tremendous challenge without good English language skills, and a clear epistemological foundation or stance and a paradigm for one’s teaching while coordinating a broad base of knowledge in your library.

If I hadn’t spent so much time in scholarship and journalism I think I’d feel lost at sea trying to offer advice about so many different topics and careers, or would I? As Neil Postman notes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985) in the world of print **150 years ago every citizen in America was highly literate**; more literate than today’s citizens. How could this be, you say, when we have such an embarrassment of “riches” in the age of information? Today amidst the myriad distractions of social media students have quick access to meaningful information unprecedented in human history, except perhaps when Socrates held court! But how do they find this really! How many papers are just lightweight as they don’t succeed in finding good sources and refuse to use the library! (Click on library and leave open…) Just as too much freedom without limits isn’t freedom at all, but enslavement, so too much information and technology apparently leads to ignorance and that nourishes plagiarism. Students are forced to build their ideas on the outmoded assembly lines of the compulsory factory schools; then we wonder why they use manufacturing “Just in Time” tactics to find information only when they need it, not to use long-term memory. There is no time to contemplate morality or anything else.

When I interviewed for my first, non freelance writing job, as a reporter, at the *Waterbury Republican-American* in 1978, I had to take a test. I don’t remember all of the questions, but I do recall not knowing the names of all of the members of The Supreme Court. As I did a good job with a two-pronged lead on the other part of the test, writing an article, I got the job. The interviewer said that I could always just look up the names of the members of the Court. How many of you are familiar with online libraries, including electronic books and the many databases? Let’s take a quick look at ours and “feel the powah of the light side”!

Today, research power has become a reality with the Internet in a way I never could have imagined, a great boon to many writers, and foreseen to some extent by Marshall McLuhan whom I studied as a student at Fordham. We are all spoiled in this regard, able to look up practically anything, we surmise, on Google at anytime. In class it is a challenge to break the Google habit, especially as they choose their own research topics and they’re usually about some problematic, breaking news aspects of our culture. And certainly the Googleplex gets better all the time but using this exclusively, relying on dotcoms, often leads to poor research papers. To start to confront the habit the first essay in class is a personal reflection, using the chapter about the 10,000 hours in Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers*. (New window…) <http://www.newyorker.com/news/sporting-scene/complexity-and-the-ten-thousand-hour-rule>

Every writing class after all has to start with some kind of personal essay! At UofH it was a “personal conflict” narrative. This does help me to get to know them a bit which is vital when totally online, and start to determine their context sensitive, epistemic position. For this class we can’t assume anything. They’ve had many different, varied and sometimes very problematic prior experiences in all kinds of colleges and schools, and they can enroll from all over the world. *Outliers* is a good way to engage them because of Gladwell’s focus on the big C: “culture.” The culture wars aren’t over yet! <https://newrepublic.com/article/121627/war-soul-america-history-culture-wars-review> I wasn’t aware of the overriding focus on “culture” in academe until I started teaching at UofH, and I’m sure there is plenty of controversy about it but it does make sense as a way to engage diverse students in writing. There are many ways of knowing, and categories of knowledge that may interest us more at different stages of our lives, and a focus on culture is a common denominator so *Outliers* works pretty well.

My preferred book would be a small one, entitled The *Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story*, by Brian Swimme, a mathematical cosmologist and co-author with Thomas Berry of *The Universe Story*. A Fordhamite, Berry also reviewed Louv’s book. It has an epistemological focus as it is about a new cosmological paradigm replacing the one we have now based on consumerism. <https://storyoftheuniverse.org> I just don’t know if the average students would read it! Based on my experience at UofH they don’t want to admit that consumption is a problem. This gets to the heart of Michael Roth’s book. Is education all about getting a job to become a super consumer or is there more to it! As you may recall, when America invaded Iraq the President told Americans to go out and buy stuff! If you haven’t seen it before, “The Story of Stuff” is a great video for students to experience. Is anyone familiar with it? <http://storyofstuff.org/movies/story-of-stuff/>

So what do you know, how can you know what you know or don’t know, and why should you care unless this knowledge is necessary to get and hold a job? Notice the focus on “what, how and why” and these are the key terms for this discussion and in a research class. They are more important than who, where and when and lead to the ultimate “so what”? question. In the Middle Ages you could basically become familiar with everything there was to know. Life was harsh, but the peasants had lots of leisure time when the harvest was in, hibernating all winter, as Gladwell notes in his book. A defined epistemology was simple and the Church would just tell you how to think. There was little worry about the problem of skepticism, and instead there was a focus on how this comes about: the mechanisms of cognition, concept formation, etc. “Medieval epistemology, therefore, typically shades into what we would nowadays call philosophical psychology or philosophy of mind; after the recovery of Aristotle’s *On the Soul*, it was regarded as a branch of the philosophy of nature” (Spade, Paul Vincent, "Medieval Philosophy", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/medieval-philosophy/> ).

I often joke that I should have been born in a different era, given my love of nature and poetry, and my wife agrees! But this emerged from my early years in a male’s only private school, where poetry was at the core of the curriculum, as it was at Hartford Public High School which my father attended and was one of the finest schools in America. At the school we had lots of time to develop a philosophy of life, in a six-year curriculum. I built on the classical poetry that my father could quote extensively until his dying day. Today we have lost the small farms such as my grandfather had in Avon, and our connections to the land are tenuous at best, poetry is not at the heart of the curriculum and in fact we barely use our long-term memories according to Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows.* <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127370598>

And so we have to find new ways to find time for reflection given the rigors of the workplace. Nowadays when you have a job you have to spend a certain amount of time each week always thinking about and planning for the next job! Or better yet, have two jobs in case one tanks on you! That was my strategy after a while, as a professional writer, editor and publicist.

A discussion of the best use of our time on the Earth is relevant for a discussion of epistemology, because if you don’t have time to think you can’t develop a theory of and foundation of knowledge to use in your life and then utilize the tools of critical thinking to investigate belief vs opinion. For some research on this I refer to a book that I discovered around 1968, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, by Josef Pieper, with intro by T.S. Eliot. <https://www.scribd.com/doc/28873477/Leisure-the-Basis-of-Culture> (Look at this briefly.) For a good piece on critical thinking see Insight Assessment by the way. <http://www.insightassessment.com/Resources/Select-Tools-For-Teaching-For-and-About-Thinking/Critical-Thinking-What-It-Is-and-Why-It-Counts/Critical-Thinking-What-It-Is-and-Why-It-Counts-PDF>

And so how we access knowledge effectively becomes actually much more challenging than in the Middle Ages, without enough time for reflection and guidance regarding the most important thinkers of history and a lack of consensus on who they might be, as noted by E.D Hirsch, who attempted to make that happen. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/what-every-american-should-know/397334/>

We are on information overload and we live in a gilded Tower of Babel, in the developed world at least. Or as Newton Minnow, head of the FCC said in 1961 when TV as still young, “a vast wasteland.” <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.htm>

So how can we guide our students in this even more vast wasteland? Remember, they’ve probably not studied philosophy in the schools, and so have never had a chance to build a philosophy of life, and they’re trying desperately to connect their lives to their jobs in a beneficial way without a real philosophy.

Enter epistemology in the predominant forms of logical positivism or constructivism and the Medusa of plagiarism with many heads. (Click on Darlaston-Jones on blog… ) I have to admit I found this on Google, from the University of Notre Dame, Australia, and it is a good summation of some of what I’m trying to say today. IDS 101 uses both forms of epistemology, in a mix that is largely defined by the instructor, as much as possible within the template anyway.

On my blog I’ve started to unearth valid and useful free web sites that are good for research purposes. You’ll find some of them on any college library web site I believe. The goal is to get students away from sites like this high-school level one entitled ProCon.org for example: <http://www.procon.org> Look at these “hot button” popular topics, and yet I can’t tell them not to choose one of them. If I have to read another paper on obesity I’ll scream! I can only say that “there are no boring topics, just boring questions.” Or substitute the adjective “irrelevant” if you prefer. We now live in the Digital Commons and it is amazing. <http://network.bepress.com> or <http://digitalcommons.bepress.com>

I wrote a paper on plagiarism in fact, inspired by my students, wherein I surmise that it is often driven by their lack of an epistemic stance. (Click to it on the blog.) That was the inspiration for my proposal for this seminar, along with my piece on “The Conundrum of Education in the Age of Distraction” posted on Merlot. (Click on it in blog… ) Merlot is fascinating as it appears to be tied into Google+ and Academia.edu. Sign up in Merlot and you’ll get emails on new writings that interest you from the vast world of academe. I got one from a guy in Spain who made a play about Orwell’s *1984* and is eager to read my thesis on Orwell’s art and polemic when I finally upload it to the website of my graduate alma mater, Trinity. <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu> The library uses the Digital Commons. <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu>

While there is certainly no excuse for overt plagiarism, looking at this kind of sharing and the potential and power of The Creative Commons in particular does raise some intriguing questions about epistemology today, but in fact these questions aren’t new. Thomas Jefferson once wrote in a letter to Isaac McPherson on August 13, 1813: “If nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea, which an individual may exclusively possess as long as he keeps it to himself; but the moment it is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of everyone, and the receiver cannot dispossess himself of it. Its peculiar character, too, is that no one possesses the less, because every other possesses the whole of it. He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.”

The problem is that while students today live in a world of information at their fingertips, they are also in a world of shadows as they’re ambivalent about anyone’s knowledge of claims other than their own, even or especially their professors, and distraction is public enemy number one. Here is a quote from this piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Ed* which was also an inspiration for this seminar: <http://languages.oberlin.edu/blogs/ctie/2009/01/20/wake-up-and-smell-the-new-epistemology/>

*“Short of fame or a lottery win, today’s students recognize that a college degree is the minimum credential they will need to attain their desired standard of living (and hence “happiness”). So this new epistemology produces a rather odd kind of student — one who appears polite and dutiful but who cares little about the course work, the larger questions it raises, or the value of living an examined life. And it produces such students in overwhelming abundance.”*

Carr writes: “We want to be interrupted, because each interruption brings us a valuable piece of information... And so we ask the Internet to keep interrupting us, in ever more and different ways. We willingly accept the loss of concentration and focus, the division of our attention and the fragmentation of our thoughts, in return for the wealth of compelling or at least **diverting** information we receive. Tuning out is not an option many of us would consider” (133-4).

They’re in the midst of the culture wars, and it even seems that at least one scholar thinks we’re seeing a boom in historiography in this regard! <http://s-usih.org/2015/01/a-boom-year-in-culture-wars-historiography.html#more-9624>

So in IDS 101 students study *Outliers* and revitalize, rekindle or build respect for their own power of self-learning and concentration and the value of liberal education via very focused engagement with the text and to some extent with each other and the instructor. Last term I had a very inspirational class, and that encouraged me also to do this seminar! There is a dual focus on both forms of epistemology. They learn to manage complexity and distinguish ends from means, which is the heart of critical thinking, and finding the right attitude to do so is the realm of the liberal arts, a spirit of inquiry never more needed than today. Not that many don’t whine about the workload certainly! Yet in my last class the volume of posts was voluminous and there was no whining. So every class is different, but then we’ve been refining this one for some time now to try to perfect the instructions and that helps a great deal.

**Not long ago at Fordham, alum Chris Lowney, former Jesuit seminarian, author of *Heroic Living: Discover Your Purpose and Change the World*, and former managing director at J.P. Morgan, spoke on the financial meltdown of 2008. He said that America needs people who can distinguish ends from means, make great choices and reflect daily on what is happening. The title of his talk was “Could St. Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* Have Spared Us the 2008 Wall Street Crash?” He said that: “Virtually no attention has been paid to help sharpen the decision-making skills of the human actors in this industry. This is where Ignatius can contribute critically. The *Exercises* force participants to reflect deeply about human purpose before making decisions about their own careers or the lives of others. We humans often choose badly not because we lack data or analytical tools, but because we are gripped by ‘disordered attachments,’ unfreedoms or desires or biases that undermine our decision-making ability. We need to develop a habit of reflection in a world that just moves on. We need to become courageous leaders in a world with too few of them.”**

**We need to be both logical and constructivist leaders in our own lives and families and communities and realize that knowledge is a means to an end but it is also an end in itself especially as it relates to our lives.** That hope must spring from our vision of a world of knowledge and how to maneuver and navigate in that world. Our students must become leaders in their worlds, contributing to the common good, and lead others to lead themselves. Rugged individualism and self-reliance are still valid ways of life, within reason, and Michael Roth provides good background on this in his book. Without this spirit people too easily lose hope in a complex world with many natural disasters and conflicts. But without community spirit, and the ability to really leverage this spirit, the essence of progress becomes questionable. cannot be guaranteed.

My favorite inspirational reading is *Scientific American* and *Smithsonian*. A scientific approach can help us to create connections to the natural world and find or rediscover enchantment in the realm of ideas and the life of the spirit. Pine trees are helpful in this regard it turns out. Scientists say they’ve found a mechanism by which these “sweet-smelling” vapours turn into aerosols above boreal forests. These particles promote cooling by reflecting sunlight as well as reflecting rays back into space. This perfume is one of the most significant but least understood sources of aerosols in North America, Northern Europe and Russia. Maybe this will help to limit rising temperatures, or maybe not. The forests will stop emitting vapours if they become too stressed from heat or lack of water. Whether looking at human evolution or dark matter and energy there is a vast amount of inspirational reading in the sciences, and no excuse for some level of optimism – if students take the time to read this stuff – and it does take time. We are on intellectual and emotional journey into the zone of modern consciousness, aflame with myriad distractions of every kind, but also full of the excitement of amazing discoveries. The functioning of the brain’s 100 billion neurons, of animal emotions, galactic events such as the immensely powerful gamma ray cloud surrounding our galaxy, or undersea life living on minerals, with no sunlight and near volcanic vents at the bottom of the sea. The list is endless.

The 100th birthday of Dylan Thomas was 2014. In “Fern Hill” we read “Now when I was young and easy under the apple boughs About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green, The night above the dingle starry, Time let me hail and climb Golden in the heydays of his eyes.”

At the end as Thomas aged he woke “to the farm forever fled from the childless land. Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means, Time held me green and dying though I sang in my chains like the sea.”

We are caught between the machine and the farm; between a sci fi world and nostalgia for a simpler time. We love our technologies and science but deep down we know that we are children of nature. **Experience with nature is crucial to encourage independent learning and happiness. Wordsworth in 1798 penned: “One impulse from a vernal wood, May teach you more of man, Of moral evil and of good, Than all the sages can.”**

**Thomas wrote: “**The force that through the green fuse drives the flower Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees Is my destroyer. And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.”

**In teaching or in business we consider motivational issues in relationship to the common good, home life, nature, the media, loneliness, happiness -- to better motivate employees or students to learn. If a teacher can demonstrate that learning is a “big picture” activity, a transcendent and spiritual activity, and a way to make sense of reality, then the student will want to learn.**

<https://www.google.com>