

Subject: Strategies for Learning
Interviewee: Sr. Susan Coler
Interviewer: Tim Lacy
Time: 1 p.m.
Date: Thursday, January 2, 2003
Place: Mundelein Dean's Office (Sky Building, room 204,
Loyola University Chicago)
Transcriber: Tim Lacy

TRANSCRIPT

TL (Tim Lacy): My name is Tim Lacy, and I am interviewing Susan Coler on Thursday, January 2, 2003. Susan, you're there? [Coler was prompted in this fashion because the interview took place via telephone.]

SC (Susan Coler): Yes I am.

TL: Okay. First question: What do you recall of your overall experience with Mundelein College and/or its Weekend College?

[Explanation of background noise: It was a continuous, evenly-spaced "tone," characteristic of the now common warning of a vehicle "in reverse," that began during the asking of the first question. Loyola is constructing a new "Life Sciences" building, on the west side of the Skyscraper building, and the noise came from there. The "tone" is audible for about two minutes. Other noises that occur in this recording may be from the construction site.]

SC: My overall experience was that Mundelein College was a wonderful place to nurture true learners. That the faculty was very devoted to helping people learn, in the variety of me..., through a variety of means. Um. The Weekend College [hereafter, WEC] was a, was a doorway for adult students to get that college education that they might not have been able to get any other way. And not only did they get a college education, but the got

a college education from a top-notch teaching faculty whose real focus was on the teaching and learning process. And, so, I think the quality of the education received by those adults was surpassed by none.

TL: Okay. Um. How long were you associated with Mundelein College in general, and the [WEC] in particular?

SC: I, I was a student at Mundelein College from 1969 to 1971. Then I began teaching at Mundelein College in 1976. And, I was involved in Mundelein through 1986, although I was not teaching through about five of the last years I was in it. Um, academic advising and administration. So I probably taught about five years. Uh, in terms of, of how many years I taught [WEC] courses, I couldn't tell [you].

TL: Okay.

SC: I, I did teach in the [WEC].

TL: And, did you, uh, teach Strategies for Learning [hereafter, SFL] in the [WEC].

SC: I did not [SFL] in the [WEC]. I taught in the day school.

TL: Okay. Um.

SC: At least I don't think I taught it in the [WEC]? Uh, I mean, I assume you have all the records.

TL: Actually, I do not have all the records. Um. I've looked through the [WEC] archives, and teased out as many names as I could. But it's not, they didn't list all of the team teaching instructors per semester of, of, uh, [SFL]. So, I ...

SC: [interrupts] I...

TL: ... don't know everyone who taught it.

SC: I don't remember using the Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, so I think I did not

teach in the [WEC] program, the [SFL] course.

TL: Okay. Um. Of course, that's no matter for this interview [be]cause I'm [going to], the focus here is [SFL] and, and Adler's *How to Read a Book* [hereafter, HTRB].

SC: Right.

TL: So, we'll go ...

SC: You know, the other piece that might be of interest is that I also was a student in the Mundelein Graduate 'Spirituality Program' in their [WEC]. So, even as a teacher and an administrator there, I also was a student in the [WEC], in the graduate program.

TL: Interesting. Interesting. Um. So, let's get a little more specific here: What was your experience with the course [SFL]?

SC: My experience was teaching it to eighteen-year old freshmen, coming to Mundelein College, women. And my experience was that it was a great, opening up experience for those women. Uh, my experience was, now I was teaching this in the late seventies, early eighties, that for many of the these women the [SFL] class not only gave them interesting and very useful tools for becoming thinking, educated women. But, for many of them it was also their first exposure to notions about feminist theory. And so the, use of the, uh, John Stuart Mill book was particularly interesting. And the other books in that course. So, it had sort of a dual function: it gave them tools for learning but also opened them up a whole new, type of thinking, in terms of, um, women's issues.

TL: Sure. Sure. You were able to incorporate the, the feminist/women's history, women's studies issues, uh, in with all the different methods for, for learning.

SC: That's correct.

TL: Okay. And, you may have said this earlier, but how long were you involved with the

course in particular?

SC: You know, I don't remember. Uh. [Pause for about four or five seconds]. I truly don't remember. I don't know if I did it all the full five years I was there [pause] that I was teaching. I mean I was there for ten years, but I think I was only teaching for about five of those. Um, I don't remember what ... I, I know I started in 1976. I'm not sure when was the last [SFL] that I taught.

TL: That's okay. Um. Okay, let's take this a little more specific again. How important was the use of Mortimer Adler's [HTRB] to the course?

SC: It was central to the way the course was structured. I mean, the course was structured around the book, and so therefore the book was important. Um. That's a simple answer, I guess. I mean, that would be what I would say. I mean, I suppose one could find other books that you could use as sort of the central, um, learning tool. But, that's what we used, and it was effective.

TL: Okay. Well, actually that's helpful because, it, um, when I've interviewed others, they haven't always specified that. Uh, well, it's mixed, that the book was central to how the rest of the course played out.

SC: I think it was central. I mean, as I said, my memory is a little vague these days. Um. And, if I had, sort of, the outline for [SFL], I might have a different sense. But, I mean, just my recollection and my sense was that it was key.

TL: Right. Um. And how did it help the students understand the John Stuart Mill's, John Stuart Mill's book. That, I, I wish I had the title in front of me, but it's, I think it's *On the Liberation of Women* [actually, *The Subjection of Women*]?

SC: I think that's close enough.

TL: Yeah. Okay.

SC: I think it gave them a means by which to analyze the thinking in the books. A means by which to really understand what was being said and how points were being made and how they were supported. John Stuart Mill's writing was a little heavy, and a little out of date but, and so it gave them a way to discover that, you know, the vocabulary or the style doesn't necessarily determine the freshness of the thoughts. It gave them a way to access those thoughts even though it might not have been in as accessible form as more contemporary readings.

TL: True. One of the central points of Adler's [HTRB] is coming to terms with the author and understanding each word that the author uses, in, in a text, in its special sense. And, maybe that's what I'm getting at is, is that: Would you agree that, that Adler would help someone understand a complex thinker like Mill? And, and being able to break it down into component parts, like: understanding the terms, and then, you know, building the outline, and seeing from the whole to the part, and then back from the parts to the whole?

SC: Without question. I mean that's exactly what I was talking about when I said, to take a medium that might not be as comfortable for somebody to navigate through, and to provide, you know, some steering mechanisms.

TL: Sure. Okay. I just wanted to repeat it back so that I was understanding. You know, making sure that we were on the same page.

SC: Uh hum [affirmation].

TL: Um. Now the rest of the course as, I'm going to jog your memory here.

SC: Thank you.

TL: The rest of the course involved writing a, uh, mini-biography, autobiography, library

exploration, um, uh, doing the, uh, I'm pausing here for a minute, the 'learning tools test?'

SC: Okay.

TL: Where they, uh, they take a test and they understand what kind of thinker they are.

SC: Okay.

TL: That was one portion of it. Um, 'Learning Skills Inventory.'

SC: Okay.

TL: That's what it was called.

SC: Okay.

TL: Uh, so anyway, the book [HTRB] then, does, in my opinion, and I want to see if you agree with me, it doesn't seem the book would really help a lot with the rest of the course, but it would help a lot with the rest of their courses after [SFL].

SC: I think that is true without question. I'm thinking that the outline for the Strategies may have modified over time. I'm not sure. For example, I don't remember the autobi, biography being a part of it in the early ... Do you know if it, the outline changed over time?

TL: Uh, I think it did a little bit. Prudence Moylan incorporated an autobiography portion. And I think in the mid-seventies, when the course was constructed ...

SC: Uh hum.

TL: ... it had a, a one-weekend autobiographical portion.

SC: Right. And what I'm thinking is, perhaps in the day program, where we had more regular contact, we may have done more with the John ..., with the Adler processing.

TL: Right. And,

- SC: And critical-thinking. So ...
- TL: That would help.
- SC: Um, ...
- TL: Go ahead.
- SC: Clearly, it did help them in terms of other courses.
- TL: Right. And I do remember that they usually would spend two weekends, uh, covering Adler and then applying Adler.
- SC: Right.
- TL: This is in the [WEC] format, and ...
- SC: Uh hum.
- TL: I wasn't sure how it would work in the regular, regular college.
- SC: I think we spent a fair amount of time in the regular college.
- TL: It, it seems to me that it must've garnered a fair amount of time because they eventually separated the courses into a separate analytical reading course [Gen. 141].
- SC: Right.
- TL: And so it makes sense to me that there must have been a need or a feeling that this was important, therefore we should break it out later.
- SC: Uh hum.
- TL: [Be]cause it was General Studies 140 is [SFL], and then it was General Studies 141, Analytical Reading. And, and 141 came later, a few years later.
- SC: Right. And I, I primarily taught the 141, I believe.
- TL: Okay. Well, um, let's see, let's see how much more you remember.
- SC: Okay.

TL: [Laughs]

SC: [Laughs] Alright. I'm sorry.

TL: Um. How did the students respond to the book's [HTRB] use? Do you remember any particulars, any sorts of, this will be a real stretch, but any male/female differences? I know that there were male, male students in the regular and the [WEC]. A, a small number, maybe like one in fifteen or so. But, I, I'm wondering if you have any memories of student responses?

SC: [Unclear] My memory of student responses is, is that it was very eye-opening for them. And some of them, you know, just jumped in with both feet and some of them were a bit threatened by the feminist concepts. Um. But, for the most part, I think they found them very enlightening and very stimulating.

TL: So if they reacted, you're saying it, it might have been more to what you were applying the use, the book to, ...

SC: Right.

TL: ... as opposed to the book [HTRB] itself.

SC: Yes, yes.

TL: Interesting.

SC: Without question. And I think, I mean for an eighteen-year old person, the book, the Adler book, provided a, like I said, a tool to access difficult reading. And I think they were exciting about tackling, you know, these difficult books and, or allegedly difficult [chuckle] books, and really being able to understand them.

TL: Right. Um. Let me move on then. How did you feel personally about the book's use? For instance, um, have you thought about it since the course? Have you, has it come up

in your head as you've worked with other people, or in other situations, outside of the college.

SC: Not by name. But I became an attorney and I, uh, part of it, I mean I think I really enjoyed the analytical-critical reading stuff, err, teaching that I did. And I'm sure it [unclear] my thinking. I haven't thought about it, you know, directly as this is, you know, what Adler suggested that we do, but I'm sure it has affected how I approach my own writing process.

TL: Sure. You might find it interesting to know that when Adler was appointed to the faculty at the University of Chicago, he was appointed to the law school faculty.

SC: Interesting.

TL: When ...

SC: I wouldn't be at all surprised.

TL: Yeah, he, he, you know, started, he was teaching at Columbia, his Ph.D. was in psychology, but when Robert Hutchins brought him to the University of Chicago, he was half-appointed in philosophy and half in the law school.

SC: I would believe that.

TL: [Laughing]

SC: [Laughs] No question.

TL: Um. Okay. Uh. That's really about it. Do you have any final thoughts? Uh, is anything popping into your head now that I've jogged your memory some? Just anything on [WEC], or the course, or, or the book, or anything?

SC: [Pause]. Uh, no. I mean, I, what I'm struck by is you're talking about how the great books, rather than being something that are, that, that are not accessible, that, uh, [HTRB]

did make them more accessible. And I think that is absolutely true.

TL: Yeah. That, that's ...

SC: [interjection] Great.

TL: ...essentially g[oing] to be one of the points of my dissertation. Is I, ...

SC: Yeah.

TL: ...I believe that the book did this when it was first published in the 1940s. And by showing that it was effective in Mundelein College I, um, I think I will be able to backdate that effectiveness to when the book first came out in the forties, and show that this was an, an inspiration, I think, for people.

SC: Well, it's more than an inspiration. It was concrete tools in their hands.

TL: That's very true. Okay. I'm going to stop the tape, but it doesn't mean, I don't want you to hang up just yet.

SC: [Laughs]. Okay, I won't hang up.

TL: Okay.

[end of interview]

[The interview lasted less than 15 minutes.]