

Subject: Strategies for Learning
Interviewee: Prudence Moylan
Interviewer: Tim Lacy
Time: 1 p.m.
Date: Monday, September 16, 2002
Place: Moylan's Office (Crown Center, 5th floor,
Loyola University Chicago)
Transcriber: Tim Lacy

TRANSCRIPT

TL (Tim Lacy): This is an interviewing with Dr. Prudence Moylan on Monday, September 16th [2002] at 1 p.m. Um... First question: This is sort of a warm-up, just to help you recall – since it's been, what, over ten years now? Um... What do you remember most about your overall experience with Mundelein College's Weekend College?

PM (Prudence Moylan): I think my first remembrance is what a wonderful experience it was to teach adults. It was very, uh, different and the planning for engaging very serious students who read the books and who wanted to talk about them was different from, you know, trying to, um, get undergraduates to know the basic information. So, the whole opportunity to really have a conversation about important issues and ideas, based on common readings, was just a wonderful [emphasis] teaching experience.

TL: Did .. did you find that they were able to ... This may seem like a common sense question. But, did you find that they were more skilled at drawing on their experiences than the students that you have now? Which, maybe are presumably, not adults, I guess you could say?

PM: Well, I, uh, you know, this was the other thing we thought about. Eighteen-year olds are adults in a formal, legal sense. And, I would say that I actually learned from teaching, uh, older adult students how to challenge younger adults to be responsible for engaging their own experience. They tend, I mean my, my sense, then and now, is that, um,

younger students, in classrooms, for maybe for a variety of reasons, tend to become passive in an expert culture. And they sort of want you to entertain or tell them the story or ... And it may be that when you are that age the classroom is not the center of your life. When you are older you made a commitment to return to serious study, for a credential or whatever, then you've made that an important part of your life. You have to organize your time and your money, you know, to get there, to do the work. So you've already made a personal commitment that no one is forcing you to do.

It is a very different cultural experience for eighteen-year olds who are kind of in college [be]cause they need the degree or their parents want them here or um ... [unclear]. And yet I would say we have very serious students here at Loyola, and we did at Mundelein. Um. But, they [at Loyola] haven't made the commitment to learning. They've often made it to the future or, or learning what they have to learn to graduate, but not to, um, really exploring a subject. Uh, so it's, uh, adults, uh, older adults who've made this personal choice and organized their time and their money [chuckles] to engage intellectually, you know, bring a different kind of commitment to the learning.

TL: And, even more with the Weekend College [WEC], I would think, because of the planning commitment involved?

PM: Yes, although the [WEC] was organized so that, um, it would make it more convenient for people, rather than trying to come at night or frequently. I mean, at least for the humanities courses, um, the courses met every other week, sometimes every third week. And, so it wasn't every weekend. So there was a lot of independent study connected with a formal course. And, then, of course, the timeframe was that you met for three and a half hours, rather than fifty minutes or even seventy minutes which is the standard

timeframe for, you know, courses that meet several times a week. So it, uh, it was really organized to serve, um, timeframes of ... for adults who had complicated lives. So that on the weekend they could more likely arrange some other kind of childcare. They might not have to incorporate it with their work life. There was a time when, um, they weren't obligated on the job so they could organize a little better. And, I think that was one of the reasons why it was so popular.

The other reason is that, um, it, I, there was a residence possibility. Which, I think, probably never a majority, but a, a, a significant enough minority took up the possibility of doing that. But even if they didn't stay in residence, [clears throat] there was a long break at noon-time. And, when they were in a course of study, whether they were in the business program or in history, or whatever, they, they, they knew classmates. So that they were either in classes together, or they met before class at breakfast or at lunch, and so they built a community of students because they met on the weekend - and they were just in-and-out. They found ways, you know, have an, uh, exchange of ideas or meet with friends. So, it, what was wonderful about the [WEC] was that it created an adult learning environment that provided adults with the kind of peer relationships and intellectual engagement that younger undergraduates often remember as one of the highlights of their time in college. Even if when they are going through it they are not always conscious [chuckle] of it. Um. But, making friends and, you know, having the excitement of new ideas, new ways thinking, is a college experience, whatever age you are when you attend. And Mundelein College was able to do that for adults who otherwise are often, uh, relegated to fitting it in around very, um, uh, you know,

demanding work schedules and family schedules. And, in fact, given what we know about the, the work life of Americans, um, that's gotten even worse.

So, um, ... it's sad in a way that the, that that [WEC] environment for adults in college is kind of lost. There are still courses scheduled, but the difference between a schedule and building a community is significant.

TL: Yeah. Which actually is a great segue into the next part. The, my question for you is, um: What caused you to get involved with the Strategies for Learning [SFL] course? I guess, from my research, and just from the few other interviews I have had, that exactly what you just told me is, was a big connector [emphasis] to the SFL course.

PM: Well, I, um, it is for me, in the sense that, uh, well at the beginning of SFL I think, I didn't, uh, I didn't teach it in the first fall semester. I can't really remember whether I taught it in the winter um, term or, uh, I didn't teach it until the second year of [my time at] [WEC]. But it was pretty early on that I got involved. And it was when, it wa... was still had a really large team of faculty. Um. So, I can't remember exactly. But there were at least six of us, there may even have been ten of us that taught sections of twenty or twenty-five. And, then the team did presentations to the general group, and then we each took a discussion group, and then we'd bring the discussion groups back together to have a general ...

TL: On Sundays.

PM: [unclear]. Yes, and um, well right. At first it was Friday night and Sunday morning so that they could do the task, um, in between. I, .. uh. Later, I think we did change that schedule, but it's not real clear in my mind. Um. Anyway, it did got Friday/Sunday for a, a very long time. Uh. And, the, there were a couple reasons I think. First of all, not

all the faculty at Mundelein were involved in [WEC] at the beginning. It was a new adventure and it drew faculty who were interested in doing that.

And there were a number of faculty who were very critical, didn't think it would work, didn't think it was quality, didn't think you could teach in these frameworks. Hadn't, had no sense of, you know, adult, um, teaching, uh, adults as opposed to the tra.. tradition of the younger undergraduate. Uh, so, it was a very exciting community of people who wanted to do this and who were excited about doing it. And, in ... we had, actually, visitors come in, scholars, and talk about teaching adults. Now, I can't, you know, remember exactly that schedule of when they came in to help, um, kind a in-service learning, for taking on this tasks. And then, what I'm getting to is the fact that planning SFL was a kind of a practicum in putting into practice the things that, you know, needed to work, when, uh, um, that you needed to put into practice to work with adults. And, so it became kind of a model for how to rethink your own courses. It was a kind of, in, uh, you know, on-the-job learning that we did as a faculty community at the same time the students were doing, building a sense of community. So, it did connect with the whole new adventure of [WEC]. And, of course, the people who designed it understood that. They wanted the students to have this common experience and to be prepared for independent learning, for learning with peer groups, for discussion, for, um... just a, you know, the tasks that you do as a college student. So this was a um, an intense introduction to the skills you need in college.

TL: I was thinking, as something you've said here, um, caused me to the rethink my question

a little bit. I make, ... even though that's exactly connected to what we were talking about before. I was thinking about whether you were, uh, compelled, or whether you volunteered to be a part of the Strategies team?

PM: Uh... Well, you volunteered. That was a very wise decision that, to ... And, there were enough of us who were really intrigued and, and engaged and who wanted to do it. Now, I would say that the other part of the, being compelled of course, was that, um, this was an enrollment driven adventure. Um, the, the eighteen-year old population was smaller. So, you also had to think about, uh, reaching a new population. So, there was a sense [chuckle] that if you wanted to keep your job you better be involved in teaching, you know, and the, if there was a new population of students, you should, uh, em, move that way. But, it, you weren't required to do it. So, and that was very wise, because, as was clear after the first couple of years, it just became so exciting that many people who were critics or doubters wanted to participate. So it became, uh, very much something that all the faculty, uh, valued whether or not they were all involved at the same level. [Be]cause not all the courses were as easily adaptable to a weekend format. But, a, ... Especially the science, the lab sciences, that were, it was harder to, to do in a weekend format.

TL: Um. Thanks, [be]cause I wasn't clear on that. Um ... The other thing I was interested in is, um: What's your most memorable or favorite experience with regard to the Strategies class?

PM: Oh, that's really hard. Um ... It ... I suppose I would say, for me, one of the measures of success was that when we began the course, uh, we did a lot of presentation and we had the students working in small groups and we were basically teaching them, um, content and method. You know, how to do the work and how to have, um, thoughtful

conversations that were respectful of difference. But, you know, how to really engage the intellectual life. So we did that and by the fifth weekend, um, they had to, um, do their reports on creativity – which they usually did in performance. And then, in their small groups, um, we would have the course evaluation. And so the course would end with the students forming a panel and speaking for their peers, the other students, to the faculty about their learning. So that it really worked as a kind of wonderful example of moving the authority for learning from the faculty to the students. So that they became the presenters and the, um, and the informants. The people who, who said what was going on. It was a, a terrific example of achieving what SFL was really about.

TL: So it was more of a favorite event-process rather than any one moment, or any particularly memorable instance.

PM: Right.

TL: Okay. ... Um ... So those were the big questions for framing the course, which are, you know, part of my research that you know about. And the, the next set here is a little more specific. The next four, or three or four questions. So, um, fourth question: Um, how did the students respond to the use of Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book* (HTRB) in the course?

[Note: 15 minutes have elapsed in the interview]

PM: Um, I guess I would say that they responded well. We, we didn't use the whole of Mortimer Adler, and we presented the key ideas, on this section, on how to read a non-fiction book. Um. We didn't really deal with history and we didn't deal with fiction. So, in a certain sense, we introduced them to the usefulness of that book. And, I can't really say how much they made use of it, um, you know, over their college career. It had

more in it than we actually used in the course. So, we used the section on non-fiction, and we presented the tasks in, like, whatever it is, the five parts, you know: overview, look at the clues, decide what the main point is, you know, read the beginning and end of each chapter, um, decide how the parts relate to the whole. Uh, so, we presented that task, and then, the very, uh, night we presented it, they went into small groups, and they looked over the book. Uh, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (CID) is the book they had to read with this method. And, then they had to come back to the large group at the end of class with a, a, you know, a “newsprint” statement of what they thought the book was about. And then we would compare, and, us, and send them off to see whether or not that was in fact the case – and how what the book was about, and why the author wrote it, and what were the parts of it, and, uh ... So, they, ... I will say that it was, v .. very effective. And, ...

TL: The, the book or the lesson?

PM: Adler’s HTRB. Well, well both, the sense that [chuckles], um, we took the lesson from the book and then they had to read the book, you know, to see more fully how Adler developed his method. [clears throat] But, they were able to make sense, some more than others, but to make sense of Freud’s CID. [clears throat].

TL: Which is no small accomplishment! [laughs]

PM: No, exactly! A task that, on Friday night, you know, they didn’t really believe they could do. So, by Sunday morning, the fact that they cou... could come back and have this insight and compare it others. And, and, converse intelligently about it and look at, you know, where there was more precise understanding. But, um, I think, Adler does say, you know, ‘it’s better to understand half of a whole book than all of the first chapter.’

[drinks water] ... So, they were convinced that that method would enable them to understand very difficult texts.

TL: So, it was a good confidence builder, for sure.

PM: Yes, [clears throat] and essential, you know, as, for college students. To know how to tackle challenging readings. [chuckles]

TL: [unclear] Um, feel free to ... yeah. Um. Now, this is sort of related to the first question: In your mind, how did the book fit together with the rest of the course? Um. SFL was multi-layered endeavor, and this was, ... I'm very interested in the fact that this was the lead-off assignment. Uh, em. Any one of the other assignments I viewed could have been interesting lead-off assignments. Uh. There were some that had to come later. But, you know, what about, what about that made it the, you know, good for the beginning and then, you know, as a good, uh, tool for the rest of the course?

PM: Well, I, I'm not sure it was a tool for the rest of the course as much as it was, a, an appropriate beginning. Because when students are coming to college, uh, reading challenging books is one of the things they expect to do, and that they're frightened about. So, uh, to, um, it meets their expectation. It's kind of learning readiness theory that, um. ... to have them involved. The next assignment was to, to, um, do, uh, um, their own learning story. To see them, to, to, which was part of taking responsibility for being a learner. Um, and to know how they approached learning, why they wanted to do it. Uh. But, to start that way, you know, wouldn't have been the kind of challenge, intellectual challenge, that they, um, uh, identified college with. It, sss, and, so it just, it would, it just didn't have the same significance. The third assignment was research assignment. And that was to, a some extent, connected with the intellectual challenge of

HTRB because, to go, and, they didn't, that had to write, they had to do a bibliography. They didn't have to write the paper, but they had to go and research – find ten, I think, ten sources on a topic and, um, and have a thesis, and, um, look at how they would develop their paper. [telephone rings] So that ... sorry, excuse me.

[Moylan answers phone, and the interview is stopped for about 3 minutes.]

TL: Um...

PM: Were we interrupted in, by that phone call, I don't know if I finished that question?

TL: Well, I was just having you connect it a little to the rest of the course. And, I think you were, kind of, re... you, you had answered my question in the sense that it, it did set up, for some of the assignments, because it, ... and that it was a good lead-off because it met their expectation about what college life is about.

PM: Right. The course was really de, designed as, you know, four, well five separate learning tasks that addressed the, the diversity of skills and competencies that students need to think about to ...

TL: Right.

PM: ...succeed in college. So, eh, this one, of course, is foundational also. I mean, they had to read other books. They had to, um, and so, in that sense, getting them over the fear of challenging material was very important. But we didn't, kind of, re-apply that. Now, there was a course that was taught to the undergraduates [Gen 141] that was a, err, kind of a reading, intensive reading course on a theme. Where we used, um, the book, we

used HTRB. Ah, if, through the whole course. They had to read several books on those same principles.

TL: That was, uh, I think Mary Griffin taught it for a long time. It was like, Gen, Gen 141, which was the...

PM: Right.

TL: ...reading, Analytical Reading.

PM: Analytical Reading.

TL: Right.

PM: Right.

TL: Right. Um, you, um...

PM: Which was actually a separate course offered in both the [WEC] and weekday, I think.

For

students who wanted to take it. Which did use Adler's book as the foundation for, you know, ana.. reading a series of books on...

TL: Right.

PM: ...on a theme.

TL: More, an intensive ...

PM: More than Strategies did.

TL: A semester-long intensive assignment of module one. I...

PM: Right.

TL: I guess you could say.

PM: Right.

TL: Um, you, you've answered that well enough for me, [be]cause I want to get to this next

one. Um, in particular, do you recall any differences in how male or female students responded to the book?

PM: [Silence]. Well, I don't, you know, there were mostly women in the class. [WEC] was 90% women students. Um. So, I wouldn't say there was any particular, um, gender difference. I think the issues that were raised, um, by, uh, I mean about gender from the text were interesting. I'm not sure whether, you know, that was, um, so the whole thing about, uh, you know, women being the enemy of civilization.

TL: [interruption] Oh, right, when you say text you are referring to Freud's book? And...
[conversation mixed/unclear for about three seconds]

PM: Right. So there was a lot about gender, um, or men and women in civilization that got discussed. But, um, you know, that was from the stand point of adults thinking about it. And then also, of course, they had, um, it has a kind of pessimistic, uh, conclusion. At least a sort of, Freud's [opinion] uncertainty about whether civilization will survive. And, so, they would also get involved in, you know, what, he'd, um [unclear] they would be overwhelmed, in a sense, by Freud's argument. So we'd have to talk a little bit about, what, well, and we'd, we'd use Adler's method for how do you critique the book.

TL: Is it misin ... is the author misinformed or uninformed.

PM: Right.

TL: or, right.

PM: Right. And so those were key points, especially the points about men and women. And then the points about, um, you know, love and death. And they, uh, and, but I, I would say, you know, it was more of an, uh, I don't think it was such a gender difference as it

was, uh, a difference in, um, you know, kind of worldview about how [unclear]: human nature.

TL: Right.

PM: Which obviously, you know, gets into gender. But I would, I can't really say between men and women students because, they were, their, uh, um, you know, it was so predominantly women.

TL: Right. I should have been a, a little more particular. Even though I'm interested in the response to Freud too, I was more meaning did, did the ... Well, mostly women...

PM: [simultaneous to last phrase] Oh, how did they respond to Adler's book?

TL: And, did they find it a, a, a, yeah, sort of universal way to, did they feel like that they were being introduced into something that was uncomfortable or unfamiliar. The terms, for instance, like the terms of judgment of the book. I am interested in how women readers might have either been, uh, maybe empowered by that, as to what you referred earlier. In the sense that it gave them confidence to tackle a bigger task, a bigger book, like Freud's book. And, so, what I was getting at with that question is if you, if you recall any differences in how the women or men responded to the, to the method. And since, but you've already answered one part, because you don't recall necessarily that there was a big difference at all in how they all responded to the task, or in general.

PM: Yeah, I, you know, I, it's hard for me to think of specific examples. But my general impression is that women found it a useful methodology. Um. And it, and they were able to, uh, make it work. And they followed it. And, in general I would say, if there was a problem, it's that men wouldn't, you know, would see themselves as not being

obliged by the rules. [chuckle] And they wouldn't do as well, because they wouldn't actually understand it without following the method. [silence]. So, ...

TL: They wouldn't understand Freud because they wouldn't necessarily feel as compelled to follow the method.

PM: Right.

TL: Because maybe they were already, they already felt power, they, they had some power over it anyway. So, it wasn't, nothing was really going to help them, you know, figure that out anymore.

PM: Well, yeah, I mean, I, my own sense is that it's part of the, um, you know, it's a mixed thing whether it's a virtue or not. That men, um, believe what they know and what they say are important, so they don't pay attention. And, so, when you ask them to follow a method and not think their own thoughts, but think through Freud's argument. If they don't, um, you know, they are not really prepared to listen well. And, in a sense, Adler's text is way to get you to listen well to the author. So, I would say, you know, that women proved better listeners. They used the method, and they understood the book better. And men, could, uh, I mean, if they did it, they were very fine. But, they were more likely not to do it. And, to come up with their own opinions about ideas that Freud worked with but not understand his argument. So, they were selective about what they responded to.

TL: This is a general memory you have about the class and the, the assignment.

PM: Yeah, that that was, um, and I would say, I might have, is, uh, you know, I don't remember that happening so much with the broader class [SFL]. I do remember that happening in teaching analytical reading [Gen 141].

TL: Which makes sense because that's a more compressed, particular way of, of, particular use of the book in the class. And then you're going to witness it over a longer...

PM: Right.

TL: ... period of time over the semester. Okay. Um. Next question, and then I think the tape might go [side one might expire], possibly before you answer it. But, um, I think you've sort of answered this in your earlier questions, but: how did you feel personally about that book [HTRB]? Was there any other book that you had read, or anything else that could have compelled students to listen or read better?

PM: For HTRB?

TL: Right.

PM: No. There, it's, a unique. There is no other book that does that. Um. It's but, you know, as we used to say, I think it's probably still true: 'It's never been out of print.' It's a very useful guide to, uh, you know, approaching complex written material with a kind of openness and a, but also a technique that allows you to, uh, engage.

TL: And, then, I wanted to ask you that in particular, because, I mean, I know that you, because of our friendship, I know that you pay attention a lot to methodology when you're teaching. Your, your own, um, your, your theory and other's theories about how people learn. And I know that's important to you. So, you know, if I could ask you in this context and I, it,uh, I think it gives a lot of authority because you, you pay attention well, and apply yourself well to how students are, are absorbing things, and how they're responding and how they are engaging. So, that was why I, I definitely wanted your opinion.

PM: Yeah, I think it's, it's wonderful. Um. And, in fact, I mean, you know, I haven't ...

[end of side one]

PM: [We] looked and looked for another au-, um, another book other than Freud. And, it was really difficult. I think we, um, we might have tried Rollo May's *The Courage to Create*, at one time. But, uh, you know, it just didn't, Rollo May wasn't as well known. Um. It's, it wasn't as much of a classic. You know, it didn't, it wasn't identifiable to as many students. Uh. So, they didn't really know much about Mortimer Adler when they got the book. Um. Or, the great books. But, uh, you know, they, they did know Freud's, they certainly knew the name Sigmund Freud, and CID, uh, just addressed the human condition in a way that, um, was effective across time. And nothing else, we just could not find another book that was short, that was written by somebody who was a, you know, significant, recognizable thinker, that dealt with issues that were engaging to the students as well as had been engaging in other times. So, it was interesting that the, um, you know, that match was so [emphasis] powerful that we just could never find any alternatives. It just worked. [pause]

TL: I'm sure the length of CID had a lot to do with it also. Big...

PM: That helped.

TL: Big name, you know, compact, but still analyzable. So. ...

PM: Right.

TL: Um, okay. That's enough about

PM: [chuckle]

TL: ... the Adler part. Let's back up again a little bit. Um. Anything that's come to your mind, uh, after these other questions? Just in the big picture of the [WEC] and [SFL]? I know I've concentrated on a spe..., very specific portion of, of the course, which is

important to my research, but, you know, if there's any big reflection that you had, or anything that, you know, you wanted to conclude with, this is your opportunity. [laughs]

PM: [laughs] Well I, I, uh, you know, it was a wonderful, it was a wonderful teaching experience. I, uh, you know, I'm sorry that, that we aren't still doing it. That's there's not a, still a place to engage students that way. And I, you know, it, it was great experience.

I'm sorry that the, um, you know, the program that Loyola offers doesn't include this dimension of creating a college community. Um. I mean, I know that there's a continuation of offering, um, courses for adult learners, [unclear] including weekend courses. Um. I'm glad. I mean, I think that's helpful. But, that inspiration of really building a learning community of adults. Uh, is not a focal point of the program. It's simply providing courses in a convenient time schedule. So, I'm sorry about that. I thought it was a, just a, magnificent engagement for both faculty and students. I suppose the place where it goes on, if indeed it still goes on, is in, um, uh, liberal arts master's programs. Uh, that have also, Mundelein developed that program later, and it's now, of course, a big staple of adult learning at Northwestern and the University of Chicago. And they, they, um, they draw adult learners, not, not necessarily degree candidates. But they create that kind of intellectual environment. So, um, we do a lot of work here to try to create that kind of intellectual environment for undergraduates. But adult students are not, uh, don't have that opportunity.

So, it was a great experience. And Strategies was a wonderful way for them to meet one another, and for them to, um, open up to the various skills and abilit[ies], and to, the skills they needed and the recognition of the abilities they had. So, I loved it.

TL: Alright, we'll consider that done then.

PM: Great.

[end of interview and of recording on side two]