

9-1-2013

The Power of One Pen, One Book, One Teacher, One Mind: A Convocation Speech [transcript]

Donald E. Gibson

Fairfield University, dgibson@mail.fairfield.edu

Copyright 2014 Donald E. Gibson

Archived with permission from the copyright holder.

Repository Citation

Gibson, Donald E., "The Power of One Pen, One Book, One Teacher, One Mind: A Convocation Speech [transcript]" (2013). *Business Faculty Publications*. 161.

<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/business-facultypubs/161>

Published Citation

Gibson, Donald (2013). The Power of One Pen, One Book, One Teacher, One Mind: A Convocation Speech. Given at Fairfield University's 2013 Convocation, September 2013.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Charles F. Dolan School of Business at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in Business Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

“The Power of One Pen, One Book, One Teacher, One Mind”
A Convocation Speech

Donald E. Gibson, Ph.D.
Dean and Professor
Charles F. Dolan School of Business
Fairfield University

Welcome, class of 2017! I have to say, you do look great out on this beautiful lawn. A convocation is a time to consider the year ahead of you, a time to ponder the big questions before you begin the onrush of classes, a time to wonder, What have I gotten myself into? And, why are the professors dressed like that? Today, the big question I’d like you to consider is, “What is an open mind, and why is it important?” I’ll begin by making an assertion and conclude with Dean Gibson’s “Top 10 Ways to an Open Mind.” My assertion is that an open mind is one that’s ready for new ideas, a mind that’s curious and creative, a mind that’s active: seeking, learning, and applying. It’s the quest of Fairfield University to help students develop your open minds. We do this by challenging you in the classroom, by bringing you in contact with interesting classmates, faculty and staff; by exposing you to amazing guest speakers, by providing opportunities for internships, study abroad and other “real world” experiences. We also do this by offering core courses that expose you to a wide range of thoughts and ideas. We offer you what is called, “a liberal education,” which I like to think of as an invitation to an open mind.

Prior to convocation, we asked you to read the text of Malala Yousafzai’s speech to the United Nations. (Since it’s the end of summer and you had very little else going on, I’m going to assume you’ve completed this assignment.) As you know, Malala was shot in the head and neck on October 9, 2012—at age 15—while returning home in Pakistan’s Swat District on a school bus. In her speech to the UN this year, she made an impassioned plea for what should be an uncontroversial human right: an education for all people. The reason she was shot, she argues, is that the Taliban can’t accept this basic human right. Why? Because their minds are closed. They view God, she says, “as a tiny, little conservative being who would send girls to hell just because of going to school.” Malala’s is a dramatic story. We—the people on this beautiful lawn today—can’t conceive of speaking up for something as basic and vital as education and being shot for it. But notice the weapons that Malala advocates: not guns. Rather, pena, books. Knowledge.

Teachers. And, I will add, your *open mind*. These are your sources of power. At Fairfield, we want to teach you how to use them.

Now you may be wondering why the Dean of the business school is going to try to say anything about open minds. After all, isn't business concerned primarily—some would say solely—with making money? Doesn't business represent a narrow-minded approach, rather than an example of an open mind? My answer to that is, “not at Fairfield.” What's the difference here? It's that we *integrate* the foundational skills our students need for business careers with the essence of a liberal education through the core and our community. I always say, “In the Dolan School of Business we are not just concerned with achieving the bottom line; it's *how* the bottom line is achieved that's important.”

And we do have some work to do in business. You just read the honor code...it's not too heartening to note that in a recent Gallup poll only 21% of respondents thought business executives rated as high or very high in terms of honesty, above lawyers and members of Congress (of course), but below chiropractors and well below nurses, who were #1 with 85%. You go, nurses!

Fairfield's task is not simply to train students to be good *at* something, communication or science or business or nursing or engineering skills. We seek to develop students who are good *people*. That requires an open, inquiring mind.

Addressing open mindedness from the perspective of business is important, because, while about a third of you are business majors, a much higher percentage of you will eventually work for or interact closely with business enterprises. If nothing else, you'll buy your lattes and flip flops and Ipods from them. And success in business, I argue, is dependent on *thinking differently*. One of the most profitable US companies, Apple Computer, has succeeded specifically by an open minded approach to invention. Steve Jobs argued that “It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough. It's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the result that makes our heart sing.”

In order to help you reach a goal of open mindedness, at Fairfield we emphasize three things: an active learning experience, a vibrant learning community, and an opportunity to exercise passion.

First, you need to engage in an **active learning experience**. One of your readings for today was from Paulo Freire's famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. For Freire, who developed his theories by teaching sugarcane workers how to read and write in as little as 45 days, learning is essential to freedom. Without active learning, he argues, you can never be free—you will always be oppressed by others who control the system. He outlines the “banking concept” of education (by the way, no connection to how we teach in the business school!), which consists of teachers “depositing” lifeless and petrified information into the “container” of students’ minds. In this model, the teacher takes all of the action; the student passively takes lessons in, occasionally repeating back what they’ve heard, often through evil multiple-choice tests. Perhaps you’re familiar with this model from high school.

At Fairfield, we’d like to help free you from the banking model of education.

What does it mean to be an active learner? First, you need to ask questions. “Apart from inquiry...men (and I’ll add: women) cannot be truly human,” Freire says. “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men (and women) pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” (p. 58)

Second, you need to “critically consider reality,” meaning that you need to look at your environment with an eye for asking why things are the way they are, being skeptical, seeking understanding. The banking concept encourages students to passively accept your situation the way it is. It’s *you* who needs to adapt, not the situation. Active learning says the opposite: It says: “Don’t accept things the way they are.”

The third aspect of being an active learner is that it’s not enough to be a spectator of what’s going on in your life. Too often, Freire notes, we substitute spectatorship for action: we feel that by *watching* a teacher or a celebrity or an athlete we’re actually *doing* something. *We’re* taking action. The active learning approach says watching is not the same as doing. It’s not enough to *watch* Lady Gaga, you have to seek to *be* Lady Gaga. Okay, maybe that’s not the best example.

I'll try another one. It's not enough to just listen to your Fairfield professor; you need to take his or her invitation to engage. Take Professor Boryczka's classes in politics, and you'll find yourself out on a picket line or demonstrating for peace. Take Professor Ebrahim's accounting class and you'll find yourself out helping people with financial needs fill out their tax returns. Take Professor Keenan's class and you'll find yourself thinking of philosophy—and perhaps even yourself—in a new way.

Notice how an active learning approach radically changes the relationship between teachers and students. In this model, the teacher and the student are active *partners* rather than one doing all the thinking work, and one sitting in the back of class surreptitiously doing lap typing on their cell phone. You can figure out which is which.

Now, I know we just read the honor code, and I certainly wouldn't want to imply that Paulo Freire plagiarized, but it *is* interesting to note that the Jesuits developed a pedagogy, a way of teaching, with surprisingly similar ideas 400 years earlier. The three main elements of what's called the Ignatian Pedagogy are Experience, Reflection, and Action. *Experience* is moving beyond rote knowledge to application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. *Reflection* is taking time to consider the subject matter in light of your own life experiences. *Action* is taking it to the streets. The goal of a Fairfield education is not just to educate the mind: it's to change you as a person. Pretty lofty goal, we agree. All of this is to say, *your education at Fairfield may (and should) make you a bit uncomfortable.*

The second way we help you develop an open mind is inviting you to be part of a vibrant learning community. You won't be doing all this active learning alone. Now, I have to warn you, though—a “vibrant learning community” means that all of us need to actually talk to each other. I say this because with our increasing use of text messaging, e-mailing, tweeting, and facebooking, we may actually be less able to communicate with each other. I see this in businesses, where people in adjoining cubicles write e-mails to each other because they don't want to engage in the tiresome task of actually talking. This is Gibson's iron law of communication: as the use of communication technology increases, the quality of communication decreases. The more social media we have, the less we actually speak to each other.

Lest you think I'm exaggerating the potential danger, here...I can give you examples of people who have outsourced their relationships and communication altogether. *Businessweek* recently had an article highlighting a person named Christine Hauer, who executives can hire to do their networking. "For a flat fee of \$250, she'll attend one business event with you. She'll start a conversation with the people you want to meet, talk you up in front of them, and fill the inevitable conversation lulls." Really? Are we so lacking in small talk skills that we need to hire someone to do it for us?

Even more scary is the website "Rent-a-Friend," run by Scott Rosenbaum, a New Jersey marketer. The company has a database of more than 500,000 members around the world who can be employed, by paying subscribers, for platonic companionship at \$24.95 per month. "Agreeable strangers," the web site states, "are commonly contracted to go to the movies or out to dinner, give personal advice, go hot-air ballooning, attend a dance class, hang out, or go see 'Jersey Boys.' Occasionally, Rosenbaum said, the client's request is more unorthodox. When a college student was caught drinking on campus, he hired surrogate parents from Rent-a-friend to accompany him to the disciplinary meeting with the dean."

You see the bad things that can come from this? Luckily, you are in a place, Fairfield University, where strong community relationships are part of our DNA. I know, from speaking with our alumni, that many of them consider their best life-long friends to be from Fairfield. These are friends you will experience classes with, discover things with, *learn* with. And think about this: you'll be saving \$24.95 per month.

Third, this is not just about your mind, it's about your emotions, too. Having an open mind means recognizing your passions and what they mean. The research I do is on the really happy topic of anger in the workplace. It looks at what makes people angry and how the workplace can be designed to address anger, especially harmful kinds. Out of my research, I've often delivered a key message that surprises people: You *need* anger in the workplace. You need people to get frustrated and indignant when things aren't fair or just. Ghandi, for example, argued that anger could be considered heat, that when conserved, could be transmuted into energy, and in this way, "even so our anger controlled can be transmuted into a power that can

move the world.” The civil rights movement, and any important movement that responds to social injustice cannot take place without people being deeply angry about their current situation. Just ask Malala.

Does this mean you should be angry with your roommates and yell at people in class? Well, I don’t recommend it. What it means is that understanding your emotions, and getting excited about things that intrigue you or getting angry about things that are unjust is okay, and a clue to who you are as a person. You can learn from your emotions.

Too often, I think students think they shouldn’t show their excitement or skepticism or anger in class. They think any display of emotion is to be avoided. And yet, the students who really stand out in class—and the ones who will stand out in a future workplace—are often the ones who take a risk and say interesting things or show interesting feelings.

I think of Kelly McCann, a psychology major in my Management class, who was clearly excited about what the class meant for people at work. She came up after class one day and did something brave: she asked me about my research, what I was working on. I did a double take: students usually wanted to talk about getting points added to their tests; not my research. But she was really intrigued and excited, and showed it. We ended up starting a dialog that resulted in a co-authored paper.

I think of Andrew Tinari, a Finance major. He was the opposite of excited: he was skeptical about how valuable my class was, because he had already managed a bike shop in California. He thought he already knew everything about management. But the key was, he wasn’t skeptical in a way that dismissed my arguments. He was skeptical in a way that said he wanted to know more. He needed rational arguments, and when presented with them, he considered them carefully. He had an open mind.

I think of Jocelyn Collen, who just gave our invocation. Here she was, a Religious Studies major in my business class, feeling like the business majors just didn’t understand her point of view; a view that sometimes questioned whether the benefits of capitalism are worth the tremendous cost. “I feel like I’m alone…” she told me sadly after class one day. I said, “You’re not alone.

You're giving other people, people who secretly think like you do, permission to have new ideas—to question the way things are. They just aren't as brave as you are to say them out loud." I hope Jocelyn learned from being around all those business majors. I know they learned from her. I did, too. Today, Jocelyn's a campus minister. God willing, perhaps she'll be a terrific priest some day.

Active learning, a strong learning community, and a privilege to passions. These are Fairfield's paths to an open mind.

I conclude with Dean Gibson's 10 tips to fostering an open mind.

1. Ask questions. Be curious. If you don't understand something, ask.

2. When you get answers, Be skeptical. Look for the *reasons* behind people's views; consider *why* they're taking the position they are. When you read or hear something you don't agree with, think of it as an opportunity to explore rather than an opportunity to avoid.

3. I'm not trying to be a scold about this, but for goodness sake, put the cell phone down every once in awhile. Challenge yourself: how well can you communicate just using your mouth and eyes?

4. Read books; read newspapers (online or otherwise). No, really read them, don't just glance. Don't read summaries of them. Read widely and voraciously. Stay current. Become an expert in something you're passionate about.

5. Look people in the eyes when you're speaking with them. Hug others slightly more often than you're comfortable with.

6. Avoid reality TV shows. I know, I'm saying it: say "no" to Honey-Boo-boo. To "Breaking Amish," and the "Amish Mafia." (who knew?). To "Toddlers and Tiaras." Instead, *create your own reality*. Write your own TV show.

7. Do something that surprises other people at least once a week. Do something that surprises yourself at least once a day.

8. Don't eat lunch alone. Don't eat any meals alone. Food tastes better around other people.

9. Meet new people. Try to meet someone new everyday. Shock people and say "hello" to them on Metro North. **Get to know your professors.** Here's the great thing about Fairfield: Your professors really want to get to know you! They're at office hours hoping you'll show up. Get to know them. They'd like to get to know you.

10. Be brave. Think about Malala. She wasn't asking for anything profound. She was asking for education as the only solution. That girls be educated along with boys. But that simple request was unimaginably brave, and she paid a heavy price for her courage.

Most of the ideas you express at Fairfield, in classes, in your FYE groups, to your professors, are not, generally, going to result in physical harm.

But if Malala can take her life in her hands for speaking about an important idea, I think you should consider being brave about your own questions and ideas and thoughts for how to improve our world.

You won't know the power of your open mind until you use it. We faculty, staff, and administrators are excited to see how you'll exercise that power in the next four years.