

Bold Vision, Fresh Thinking: Untangling Media's Gordian Knot

*Remarks in Response to the
Distinguished Education Service Award*

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Response to the 2004 BEA DESA Award

Thank you very much for this distinguished award. I'd like to especially thank the people who nominated me, the ones who supported my nomination, and the ones who finally selected me.

I am really proud of it, but I am somewhat reluctant to accept your recognition all on my own behalf.

Three years ago my respected colleague Pete Orlik received the same award in this very room. On the way out, I caught up with him and congratulated him for his accomplishments.

"Thanks, Herb," he said, adding, "but—actually—you *all* deserve it."

His gracious remark stuck with me, and I agree with him. You *all* deserve such an award, simply for having the courage or the madness to teach in this incredibly versatile and difficult field of electronic media communication. I hope that, at least for today, you let me share this prestigious award with you all.

I owe a lot to many of you: those who shared their knowledge with me, those who helped with my books, those who actually read my books and used them in class, and those who exchanged ideas with me in conference rooms and hallways of conventions such as this one.

I wouldn't be here today, however, if I hadn't been given the opportunity to teach by Stuart Hyde 45 years ago. When I switched, somewhat reluctantly, from the industry to teaching (I was then a young director on the go), he had already established a rather demanding departmental philosophy. It was relatively simple and based on the firm belief that we can make a difference in this world and that we can help make the world a better place. I was especially impressed by these seven credos:

1. Passion for the media and respect for the industry.
2. Respect for the audience.
3. Respect for the student. Doing everything to help students achieve success, rather than looking for ways to flunk them out.
4. A balance of theory and practice.
5. A 100 percent commitment to teaching and to the academic profession.
6. Maintaining, as a faculty, a climate of cooperation and mutual respect.

7. An obligation to help each faculty member develop and stretch his or her special area of interest.

Being a young faculty member, I immediately complained:

- ✍ About the lack of books. *His answer:* “Write one!”
- ✍ About the lack of facilities. *His answer:* “Design them!”
- ✍ About the lack of media aesthetics. *His answer:* “Develop it!”

Thank you, Stuart, and all the faculty, staff, and students at SFSU who supported me and helped me do my thing.

Now I would like to share some of my thoughts on teaching electronic media with those of you who are relatively new at this and also with my esteemed colleagues who have been around for a while.

The theme for this year’s BEA convention is challenging: *Bold Vision, Fresh Thinking: Untangling Media’s Gordian Knot*. I like the bold-vision and fresh-thinking part. I am not quite so sure about media’s Gordian knot. Is it a metaphor for our discipline or for what’s in our head?

If you happen to encounter media’s Gordian knot, study it carefully. But when you see that its ends are spliced together and that the knot is then shrunk to make it impossible to untie, don’t waste your time trying to untangle it. Simply cut it. This may not represent fresh thinking—after all, Alexander the Great showed us how some time ago—but it is a good example of thinking outside the box.

The Gordian knot is, however, a useful metaphor for describing the complex and involved discipline we chose to study and teach. While we need to follow and develop our own strand, we need to do so always in the context of all others, without getting too tangled up. If *we* don’t integrate the various media fields in our teaching, how can we expect our students to do so?

Just a few examples of what I mean by *integration*:

- ✍ *Creativity and history*. You cannot engage in fresh thinking if you don’t know what stale thinking is or what happened before. How can we get out of the box if we don’t know that we are in it?
- ✍ *Production and social effects*. You cannot properly produce and encode a message if you are not aware of society’s needs and desires and of the effect the message might have on the audience.
- ✍ *Media literacy and production*. You cannot really teach media literacy by conventional analysis methods alone. Any intelligent deconstruction presupposes a basic knowledge of construction. Any worthwhile content analysis must include production variables.

✍ *Production and criticism.* As production people we need critical feedback to be optimally effective. And what would the critics do if we weren't producing something for them to criticize? As you can see, I am somewhat biased in favor of production.

But most important, we need to approach the study of broadcast and electronic media not just as a convenient stepping-stone for future broadcast professionals but also as a demanding academic discipline. I am happy to see that the continuous efforts by Louisa Nielsen—and the BEA and its dedicated leaders—have made it that way. Adding aesthetics and criticism to the production module was a significant step in that direction. I like to commend the people who had this bold vision quite some time ago.

Now some unsolicited advice to my new colleagues: I usually don't give unsolicited advice, but this is a onetime opportunity that I don't want to let pass by.

Don't ever apologize for being academic about the subject. In my 40 years of teaching, I had my share of "what's that got to do with TV?" when talking about such aesthetic concepts as subjective time, aerial perspective, or z-axis blocking. Being academic is, after all, our mission as professors in an academic institution. We have the privilege of getting paid—however little—for bold visions and fresh thinking.

In any case, don't feel that you have accomplished your teaching goal when one of your students comes up with a production that looks really "professional." Don't spend all your efforts and resources on competing with the industry on that level. They can do productions that are far more polished than ours—most of the time, anyway. That's what makes them professionals.

But I get nervous when bold vision and fresh thinking come more frequently from the industry professionals than from us.

Despite the growing monopolization of media and the unprecedented political and economic assault on our institutions, we need to preserve the academic environment as a place for creative thinking and experimentation. We need to teach our students a professional attitude toward their studies as well as a respect for the communication industry. But we should not limit our teaching to imitating that industry.

The pressure of accountability may tempt us to make our students produce "professional-quality" shows in the hope that they will garner competitive honors. I am grateful to the Broadcast Education Association and the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for sponsoring such events. However, I urge you not to engage your students prematurely in this endeavor. Don't commit most of your resources to a single extravaganza by one or two of your talented students at the expense of all others who are a little slower.

Creativity is rarely awakened by imitation, however slick it may be, or by desperately trying to live up to what has been done before. Creativity in our field needs cultivating—a passion for the media, a joy of discovery, and, yes, a tolerance for failure.

When I now screen again some of the tapes from my various production classes, I see more failures than successes—at least as measured by industry standards. When looking at them more closely, however, I can also see in many of the so-called failures an awakening, a creative spark. I can see where the students tried something new—their daring, their fresh thinking, and, occasionally, their bold vision.

Try to recognize this spark and reward it even in the projects that seemed to have otherwise failed. So long as a project is imaginatively conceived and diligently prepared, there is no real failure, even if it falters during production. In the industry there is a constant demand for stepped-up creativity and, understandably, not much (if any) tolerance for failure. But in our academic environment, we need to establish a climate in which the scholar and the dreamer, the pragmatist and the visionary, can work side by side and help one another.

Now a word to the established faculty—my esteemed colleagues and friends: You can help provide the intellectual and artistic climate for such learning. You can help provide an environment in which the student can learn the discipline and the patience necessary for research and serious production, but also one in which bold vision and fresh thinking can be exercised without fear of reprisal for both new faculty and students.

When looking back at my successes as a teacher, I am, of course, proud when I see or read about the outstanding professional accomplishments of many of my former students. But there is more to teaching media than cultivating successful professionals. Let me briefly tell you a story about Anita.

Anita was the first in her family to go to college. On the first day of class, she came early and sat in the front row. Her brand-new notebook with the San Francisco State University emblem and her pens and pencils were neatly arranged on the small armrest of her chair. She was ready to learn everything we had to offer. And then she got hit right away with my course on media aesthetics. Her first quiz resulted in a solid F. But she didn't give up. I asked her to see me in my office and helped her learn how to take notes, how to navigate through *Sight Sound Motion*, how to recognize and remember the important concepts, and how to apply the key aesthetic principles. After a few more meetings, she improved dramatically and finished the course with an A-.

I saw her again at graduation.

“Hi, Dr. Zettl. I graduated!”

“Congratulations, Anita.”

“You know, that *Sight Sound Motion* stuff really helped me shoot better videos.”

“Thanks. I'm glad to hear that.”

“Yes, but there is more to it. I’m not sure how to say it, but your class helped me look at the world with new eyes. Bye.”

“Good luck, Anita!”

This incident may not weigh heavily in an accountability report for the university trustees or our new governor, but it shows up big in my life.

Again, thank you for the award and letting me share it with you.