

ROBERT EUGENE GROSS
(1931-2007)

In the Brooklyn neighborhood in which Bob Gross grew up, it was generally understood that the purpose of going to college was to become a doctor or an engineer. It was not as well understood how one got to college in the first place. No one in Bob's family, and none of his friends or acquaintances, was a college graduate. So, as he told the story to a reporter in 1985 – Bob was the kind of memorably vivid teacher who gets written up in newspapers – one afternoon when he was hanging out with his high-school friends in a poolroom, he decided to call a telephone operator and ask her, “Where do you go to become a doctor?” She suggested New York University. He took her advice.

It turned out to be good advice, although his ambition to be a doctor did not last very long. He majored in English at NYU, graduating *magna cum laude* in 1952, and then went on for a master's degree awarded in 1953 (he wrote his thesis on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins). After serving two years in the U. S. Army in Germany, he returned to NYU to study for a doctorate in English, specializing now in the study of American literature. As was common in those years, in 1957 he accepted a full-time faculty position as a lecturer in the Department of English at Indiana before he completed his doctoral dissertation and degree. After he was awarded the doctorate in 1960, he was promoted to the rank of Instructor at Indiana, and then moved quickly through the professorial ranks to his appointment as full professor in 1968.

Right from the start of his time at Indiana, Bob Gross became known as an extraordinarily powerful teacher. In the 1950s and early 1960s, young faculty members in English were assigned to teach four courses each semester. Customarily, one or two of these courses were first-year courses in writing – freshman composition. Bob turned these courses, usually accepted and conducted at best dutifully by his colleagues, into exciting occasions in which students discovered the possibilities of their own thinking and writing. In 1962 the then director of the freshman composition program called him the most effective teacher of first-year students in the department.

Bob was equally successful – perhaps even more successful – as a teacher of undergraduate courses in literary history and understanding, and then of graduate seminars. In 1965 the department's chair reported a survey in which Bob was thought by most of his colleagues as one of the best teachers in the department, and two years after that the same chair wrote that Bob was simply “the best teacher in the Department.” In 1965 Bob was awarded the University's Ulysses G. Weatherly prize for distinguished teaching. In subsequent years he won a Brown Derby, a teaching award whose recipients are selected by the students themselves, and the Class of 1970 Distinguished Teaching Award.

“What Gross brings to the classroom is passion,” one of his students wrote, and throughout the four decades of his teaching he maintained the intensity of his engagement with books and ideas. Students and colleagues consistently remarked his “unremitting intelligence” and “finely controlled audacity,” his “vigor of mind and judgment,” “the

curiosity and learning that make him a true scholar.” A colleague who visited several of his courses “in order . . . to see why his classes fill up within an hour or two of the opening of registration,” came away with the feeling that “I was all at once in the presence of strength, seriousness, and generosity.” Graduate students also would sit in on his undergraduate classes to learn both about the literature he talked about and how to talk about it with undergraduates.

Bob liked to lecture, and he punctuated his lectures by calling on students who had not volunteered to speak, and then working their ideas into the argument of his lecture so that they learned that they really did have something to say. He was passionate too about the connection between literature and contemporary experience. He pointedly dressed in jeans, and sometimes brought one of his dogs to class, as ways to announce that literature and literary study were not special provinces of life, but of a piece with its common pleasures and concerns. “He doesn’t speak like the image of an English professor,” one of his students remarked in 1985. “He speaks on real terms, on students’ terms.” His passion was to bring his students to understand and respond to literature. But he also used literature, one of his colleagues said of him, “to understand what was happening now.”

Bob Gross found ways to take the energy of his teaching out of his classrooms, and beyond the campus. Early in his career he began organizing informal tutorials with groups of undergraduates whose talents he discovered in his courses. He lectured on American literature and the teaching of poetry to high-school teachers in the state. In 1963-64 he held an appointment as a visiting professor of English and American literature at the Universities of Zagreb and Sarajevo, and in the summer of 1964 he directed seminars for high-school teachers of English in what was then Yugoslavia. In the 1960s he taught in seminars attended by a group of steel-workers resident for a year on campus, and he lectured in seminars sponsored by the Indiana Management Institute. In 1971 he and his wife Pat were named as Danforth Associates.

Bob also thought hard about the curricular and institutional structures in which learning happened, and he worked effectively to improve them. In his early years he thoroughly reorganized the honors program in English, and went on to serve on the honors committees of both the College and the campus. In the mid-1960s he used his participation in a departmental self-study group to play the most important role in designing and implementing a wholesale revision of the undergraduate curriculum which enabled the department to reduce the usual teaching schedule of faculty members to two courses each semester. In the mid-1970s he presented his departmental colleagues with an extensive study of the sources of support for research in the humanities.

Bob’s own studies were wide, deep and conducted with characteristic intensity. He wrote, taught, and directed dissertations on the fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and William Faulkner, and especially on American poetry from Whitman and Dickinson to T. S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath. The topic of the last dissertation he supervised was a study of poetry about jazz, a project which has since eventuated in two anthologies of such poetry co-edited by Bob’s student. His interest in how language

works, and how literature makes its effects, led him to a study of other languages, and to a thorough study of prosody, a knowledge no longer common among teachers of literature. He organized and taught seminars in the history and theory of literary criticism, and he was one of the first of his colleagues to start thinking about the use of computing in humanistic studies.

In his the last decades of his time in Bloomington Bob became well-known as a trainer of dogs. He brought to his interest in training (and sometimes showing) dogs the intelligence, energy, and love for the subject of his study that he put to work in everything to which he put his hand and mind and heart. In a newspaper interview in 1990, he described himself as an “inductive trainer,” one who elicits habits and behavior from a dog rather than imposes them by force. “My goal,” he said, “is to create a team between me and the dog, not to create a master and performer.”

That sentence accurately describes Bob Gross’ purpose and practice not just as a teacher but also as one who, in an old-fashioned but honorable description of his calling, appreciated literature. He went into his classroom, and he went to books, not to impose ideas, although he held strong and fiercely promoted ideas. He wanted rather to participate in the pleasures of the text, and to show students how to find these pleasures for themselves, to feel the excitement of discovering what can be learned in each encounter. “Most of my satisfactions as a professor are eroding as the years go by,” he said in the interview in 1990. But he remembered “those magical wonderful moments when I feel that I’m helping young people acquire a sense of awareness and wonder that will help them on their road toward a life of happy aspiration.”

A wonderful phrase – happy aspiration – and the colleagues who worked with, and the students who learned from, Bob will also remember moments in which he opened for them new ways of understanding and feeling, and an enlarged sense of possibility.

This memorial resolution will be presented in the Bloomington Faculty Council and be recorded in the minutes of that body. Copies will also be sent to Patricia Gross, now resident in Rochester, New York, who will send them to her son John, of Portland, Oregon, and her daughter Katherine Ruffo, of Rochester, New York.

Donald Gray
Emeritus Professor
Department of English