

THE CENTRAL NEW YORK
BUSINESS JOURNAL

Volume 23, No. 16 — April 18, 2008

Publisher.....Norman Poltenson
npoltenson@cnybj.com

Associate Publisher Marny Neshner
mneshner@cnybj.com

NEWS

Editor-in-Chief..... Adam Rombel
arombel@cnybj.com

Assistant Editor Maria J. Carbonaro
mcarbonaro@cnybj.com

Staff Writers Kevin Tampone
(Online Editor)
ktampone@cnybj.com
..... Traci Gregory
tgregory@cnybj.com
..... Kristina Martino
kmartino@cnybj.com
..... Eric Reinhardt
ereinhardt@cnybj.com

Columnists..... Jeffrey Gitomer
David & Lorrie Goldsmith
David John Marotta
Thomas Walsh

Research Manager..... Brandon Talbot
btalbot@cnybj.com

Design and Layout Editor . Brett Schnauffer
bschnauffer@cnybj.com

Production Manager..... Erin Zehr
ewebb@cnybj.com

SALES

Sales Leader Marny Neshner
mneshner@cnybj.com

Sr. Account Managers. Bernard B. Bregman
bbregman@cnybj.com
..... Arlene Knoller
aknoller@cnybj.com
..... Mary M. Eisert-LaMacchia
meisert@cnybj.com

Marketing BBB Marketing Inc.

CIRCULATION

Circulation Manager.....Raviv Neshner
rneshner@cnybj.com

ADMINISTRATIVE

Business Manager Kurt Bramer
kbramer@cnybj.com



THE NETWORK OF
**CITY BUSINESS
JOURNALS**

THE CENTRAL NEW YORK BUSINESS JOURNAL (ISSN #1050-3005) is published every week by CNY Business Review, Inc. All contents copyrighted 2008. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the written consent of the publisher.

Cover Price \$2
Subscription Rate \$78 per year
Call (800) 836-3539

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE CENTRAL NEW YORK BUSINESS JOURNAL welcomes your thoughts, either as a Letter to the Editor or as a Guest Opinion. Include your address and daytime telephone number so that we can contact you if necessary.

OPINION

Excellence & Commitment: One Individual at a Time

By Laurence Thomas

[Editor's note: This article refers to a headline-making March 25 incident, in which the author, a tenured Syracuse University professor, ended his philosophy class lecture early because a female student in the front row was text messaging. It was the second time in five days that Thomas had cut short the class, according to a March 27 article in the student newspaper *The Daily Orange*.]

I am the professor who walked out of a class of 389 students owing to the inappropriate behavior of a single student. This action was not owing to arrogance and incompetence on my part, as some might initially suppose. First, however, some remarks about teaching are in order.

Teaching at its best is about a commitment on the part of the instructor to the moral and especially, intellectual excellence of the students in the classroom. Thus, teaching at its best is not just about conveying information, which indeed a computer can do, but caring about the ways in which and the extent to which students grasp that information. While it may very well be possible to put a price tag on the information that an instructor conveys in the classroom, what is absolutely priceless is an instructor's commitment to the excellence of each student. It is that commitment to excellence that transforms the classroom and occasions a sense of wonderment and inspiration on the part of students. And for a committed instructor, absolutely nothing is more satisfying — nothing is more memorable — than her or his students achieving soaring heights of intellectual excellence.

Unfortunately, it is increasingly held by many that at the college level, especially, teaching is none other than a service for which the student's parents are paying — paying a great deal in the case of private institutions. While I do not think that the service model applies to the college classroom, it is worth nothing that even with a "mere service" the attitude of the provider of that service can make all the difference in the world — from the cashier at the checkout line to the flight attendant to the restaurant waiter. And even with so fleeting an encounter as that of passing through a checkout line, we distinguish between an abrasive cashier and a gracious one. How much more so, then, does the attitude of an instructor matter?

Owing to the service model of education, there has been a kind of moral free-fall in terms of the respect that students owe their professors. The attitude is that students do not owe professors anything — not even respect. Thus, insofar as students do not in any way prevent a professor from speaking or prevent other students from hearing the professor, then students have a right to

do as they please in the classroom. Hence, text-text messaging and playing computer games are just fine. Indeed, if all the students want to use the lecture hour to catch some shut-eye, so what? That is their right. The professor can still give the lecture. True, but then the classroom is no longer a learning environment.

At its best, the classroom is a fiery crucible that, on the one hand, burns away misconceptions and that, on the other, occasions electrifying moments of intellectual discovery and affirmation on the part of both student and professor alike. I am the beneficiary of such moments, as students have taken a line of thought that I presented in class and pushed it in a marvelous way that I did not anticipate. And I have seen the sparkle — a beautiful sense of wonderment — in a student's eyes when I have drawn attention to just how rich her or his remark in class is. It is with much gratitude and appreciation that I can say that my own intellectual growth has been inextricably tied to the marvelous displays of intellectual excellence by my students.

Introduce text-messaging, computer games, and the like into the classroom setting bears upon the intellectual climate of the classroom — turning a fiery crucible of excellence into a cesspool of mediocrity. And yes: even one person can make a difference for the better and for the worse. That is part of what it means to take seriously the fact that each of us is an individual. Parents who are so busy claiming that they want what is best for their children cannot be serious in claiming that a professor should simply ignore text-messaging and the like — at least not if they want me to take their child seriously as they keep telling me they do. The moral indignation on my part when students act inappropriately is an integral part of the moral structure that defines my commitment to noticing and observing the excellence of my students.

At a very practical level, I should point out that a very good letter of reference on behalf of a student is not at all about the grade that the student received in a course; for that is available from the student's transcript. Rather, such a reference must convincingly speak to a student's unfailing commitment to the pursuit of excellence. In a word, a good letter of reference for a student is at odds with the very idea that an instructor merely provides a service for which she or he is being paid.

As to my walking out, my behavior is not as ludicrous as one might initially think. First of all, the doctrine of *in loco parentis* has essentially vanished from colleges and universities. Professors are not even close to being parental figures nowadays. Secondly, there are a host of rights and measures of due process that students have now. A student may simply refuse to leave if asked to leave; and if that happens it would be utterly foolish for a professor to

CNYBJ FILE PHOTO

Laurence Thomas, professor of philosophy and political science at Syracuse University, was the featured speaker for the 2006 Book of Lists preview party.

approach the student and ask the individual to leave — for the student may very well take doing so as some form of a physical threat, which raises liability issues. And if the student is a female and the professor a male: well, that combination is so legally explosive that it is almost professional suicide for a male professor to approach a female student in order to ask her to leave the classroom.

As high-school violence against teachers makes abundantly clear, gone are the days when teachers commanded enormous respect from their students — a respect that was underwritten by parents and the community alike. So, walking out of the classroom is the most decisive way to make a non-confrontational statement about the unacceptability of blatantly disrespectful behavior. And if I succeed in reinforcing a climate of mutual respect in the classroom, which has generally happened, then everyone benefits. This suggests that it is a bit shortsighted to suppose that walking out simply amounts to punishing the entire class for the fault of one.

I am the professor who walked out of a class of 389 students. I did so because I care profoundly about my students. If I should ever stop caring about them, I pray that I shall have the decency to stop teaching. □

Laurence Thomas, Ph.D. is a professor of philosophy and political science at Syracuse University and author of more than 50 articles and four books. Contact him at lthomasatmaxwell.syr.edu

We welcome your comments on editorials and any other content in The Central New York Business Journal.

HOW TO REACH US

MAIL: Send letters to: Editor,
The Central New York Business Journal
231 Walton St., Syracuse, N.Y. 13202-1230.
E-MAIL: letters@cnybj.com **FAX:** (315) 472-3644

