

Remembering Cathy Ennis: The mentor

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Abstract:

I worked with Cathy for 28 years. She was my mentor of doctoral studies and my colleague at the University of Maryland–College Park and University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). I can attest that all of her students share the same sentiment: Cathy has changed our lives for the good. As one of our students said, “I would not be where I am today without Dr. Ennis.” Cathy was, and continues to be, the greatest inspiration for us. We remember her as a demanding professor, but also as a sister and a “mother figure” who cared for her “children” all the time, even during the last week of her life.

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Article:

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Cathy’s impact on me as a scholar and a person is immense. She has shown me what a great scholar should be doing and how to do it. She was a friend of my family, she saw my children grow up... . To this day, it is difficult for me to believe and accept the fact that she has left us.

I first met Cathy on February 6, 1989, the second day after arriving in this country to study with her at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Ever since, I worked with her as a student and then as a colleague—except for the 6 years following my graduation, when, according to her, “Oh, I sent you away to experience the real world.” Throughout my career, I saw how Cathy navigated the sea of scholarship in sport pedagogy and stayed focused in her work on the most important theoretical issues facing the field. As all the articles in this volume demonstrate, her work has profound theoretical implications, as well as strong practical significance.

I remember that soon after I arrived at Wisconsin, I joined her research on cognitive styles and motor skill–learning processes. Except for her teaching times, she was out in the schools collecting data. She constantly told me that collecting data for a real research project is the best

hands-on training for doctoral students. That was a time when all data had to be punched into a roll of mile-long narrow paper tape by hand for the mainframe computer for analysis. The volume of work was tremendous. Her persistence and work ethic exemplified how a productive researcher should work. It was also during this time that Cathy launched her research on educational value orientations, one of the most influential series of curriculum studies in physical education. Her work ethic continued throughout her career with the “Sport for Peace” study, conceptual-change study, “Science, PE, and Me!”, and “The Science of Healthful Living” study. Each of these studies is an example of scholarship excellence for physical education researchers.

I remember Cathy as one of the greatest mentors. She was an optimistic inspiration for everyone around her, especially her students. When we arrived at Maryland in 1989, she and I were the only people in the Curriculum and Instruction Research Lab. But she still decided to call us a research team, “Team Maryland.” We continued to hold our weekly journal club and our biweekly research briefing meetings, in a very formal way! She would dress up for each meeting and talk off the notes she had prepared for it. Cathy believed that “if we build it, they will come.” After a few years, more graduate students were drawn by her work and joined the team to study with her. Team Maryland later became one of the most influential research teams in physical education in the United States. With our move to UNCG, Cathy’s alma mater, we have trained 17 doctoral and 14 master’s “team members”! Each year during the conference season (AAHPERD/SHAPE or AERA), Cathy got all of us together to chat about our achievement, motivate us with her unique humorous “lectures,” and give individualized advice for career advancement. As I reflect on Cathy’s mentoring over the years, I can see four strong beliefs that she wanted to instill in her students.

It is a researcher’s obligation to uphold the highest standards for research work. Cathy believed that the best way to teach this obligation to graduate students is to train them to become independent scholars. When I was choosing a topic for my dissertation research, Cathy met with me in her office and asked me to try something other than topics related to value orientations studies. She convinced me that I should try to formulate new topics and decide on one that could be developed into my own line of research for the future. She also suggested strongly that I needed to “retool” my research skills by using qualitative methods in the dissertation study so that I would improve on using these methods. Although at that time I knew I should follow my adviser’s counsel, I did not fully understand the reasoning behind her careful design for my future. She had always believed that a good researcher should be able to employ any research methods to answer research questions. She knew that I had studied qualitative methods with her quite extensively but had not had an opportunity to conduct a study independently. She saw the dissertation research as an opportunity to do that. Now I am glad I did it. Not only was the dissertation study published, but I also used qualitative methods immediately after my graduation.

I have learned from Cathy in these years that high-quality research relies on the implementation of the chosen methods in a systematic way. We need to follow these systems no matter how tedious they may be. To maintain high research quality and make sure we do not overlook or deviate from our research plans, Cathy encouraged me and many others to develop a habit of conducting research “by the books.” In our research planning, we always wrote a formal research proposal regardless of the scope of the research to ensure that the topic was theoretically

significant, research questions were supported with strong rationale, and methodology was appropriate for answering the questions. In designing a study, we always conducted a statistical power analysis to determine sample size (for quantitative research) or a careful deliberation on criteria for purposeful sample selection (for qualitative research). In planning data collection, we always conducted pilot studies to estimate validity/reliability/trustworthiness. In data analysis, we were always careful about hidden assumptions we were making that could affect interpretation of the results. When we wrote our research reports, Cathy always cautioned us not to write conclusive statements without strong support from empirical evidence. Following these principles and practices, we have been successful in conducting high-quality research studies, publishing them, and securing million-dollar funding to support our research agenda.

It is a researcher's responsibility to provide public service to the profession and scientific community. Cathy was a role model of service for all physical education researchers. She served practicing teachers through providing numerous professional development workshops, participating in curriculum development/revision in local schools and districts, helping with schools' needs for learning assessment, and working with school districts on various projects including developing statewide programs for professional development. Cathy involved her students in professional service very early on. All of our students participated in professional development workshops, went to schools to provide various services to teachers, and served as liaisons between schools and our lab. Cathy's service to the professional community is well known. She served on countless committees in SHAPE, the AERA Special Interest Group of Research on Instruction and Learning in Physical Education, and the National Academy of Kinesiology. She served in many leadership positions in these organizations, including president of the Research Consortium and the National Academy of Kinesiology. She encouraged our graduate students to become professional organization members as soon as they were enrolled in our graduate program and shared with them the importance of service to professional organizations.

Throughout her career, Cathy showed us that service is one of the most important tasks a researcher should perform and perform well. In all her service work, whether providing a workshop to teachers or reviewing a manuscript, Cathy held a high standard of professionalism for herself and for all of us. She realized that the commitment to professional service is not normally taught in graduate schools. She took on the responsibility to educate our graduate students to become warm-hearted, caring scholars and encourage us to "stay involved."

A leading scholar always places students first. Cathy was a talented academic leader who was a champion for her students, colleagues, and fellow researchers. She genuinely cared about her students' success and was sensitive to their concerns. She constantly encouraged our students to take the lead on research projects and always supported them. Cathy often practiced genuine "tough love" and believed that tough love is true love. Cathy, however, exercised her tough love in a positive manner where she used daily rewards (positive encouragement) to motivate our students to continue pursuing the goal of excellence.

Cathy started a tradition (and rules) in our lab that allows graduate students to take a leading role in writing research papers. Graduate students were encouraged from day one to develop a research interest within our current research project, "own" it, make a plan to analyze data, and

take a lead-author role in writing manuscripts. In the past 15 years, we have been fortunate to be awarded several large federal grants to conduct curriculum intervention studies. Our graduate students were involved in this robust research atmosphere on the first day they began their study with us. Cathy guided their work by helping them make topic-by-topic research plans. Many of our graduate students followed these plans and became very successful researchers after graduation.

Cathy believed in positive reinforcement. She gave a university pin to each student who made her or his first research presentation at a national or international conference. Cathy said to me once “Well, they can go to the bookstore to buy one. But they have to earn this one from me!” Our students value these pins and still are proud of having received them from Dr. Ennis!

An effective scholar always keeps a positive perspective and respect for others' work. One very important practice I learned from Cathy is to always keep a positive perspective and respect others' work. It is very common for scholars to have drastically different perspectives. It is not unusual to read or hear some scholars criticize each other's work. It is equally not unusual to see reviewers and journal editors provide unnecessarily harsh, sometimes unfounded, comments to authors. Cathy held and practiced a philosophy of protecting scholarship freedom by respecting others' work. She thought it was important to teach our students about the practice.

Cathy, one of the greatest thinkers and writers in curriculum studies, had taught us an important rule of writing, that is not to criticize others' work in order to promote our own work. She believed that quality work should always stand on its own right (e.g., theoretical foundation, rigorous methods, competent analysis, and insightful interpretation/elaboration). She understood that scholars often approach a problem from different perspectives. All these perspectives may come from legitimate theoretical foundations, and there is no absolute right or wrong with respect to them. Knowledge is fluid and is shaped and reshaped all the time. Under her teaching I, and many of our students, worked hard to instill this rule in my mind as a guiding principle to scholarship. Cathy often went extra miles in revising our earlier manuscripts word by word, sentence by sentence to uphold this principle. But, being positive does not mean lack of principles. Cathy's own writing clearly showed that being positive and upholding high principles go hand in hand in promoting high-quality scholarship and moving the field forward collectively.

Throughout the years, our lab has been a leading physical education research lab. Our work has been intense. But Cathy was always able to keep our sanity. She genuinely cared about everyone's well-being and we have had so much fun working together as a group. Many of our graduate students were international students, myself included, and Cathy used to hold “Friday talks” with them individually to help their English. She invited them to her house to show them what BBQ was because they saw the letters B B Q but had no clue what they meant! One can imagine how happy the students were when finding out what BBQ really was, along with a great Virginia BBQ meal! In this and many other ways, Cathy encouraged all students to know the local culture and get involved in the community. She often borrowed the *Washington Post's* motto to encourage them to get involved in the community life: “If you don't get it, you don't get it!”

Personally, I have so many fond memories of working with Cathy. We had a great beer moment in Berlin, Germany, in 1994 when both of us presented our own research at a conference. On a trip to China, we searched half the city of Guilin trying to find any food that was “Western” after eating traditional Chinese food for a week, including squid that she disliked. Eventually, we found the “colonel” from Kentucky! She was so delighted joking “this is not a moment for healthy but for culturally relevant food!” She taught our international students about using silverware, which was fun! And when we were updating our chapter on skill learning in the summer of 2016, she reminded me that one of my unfinished projects was to help improve her chopsticks skill. We went to the Basketball Hall of Fame after a conference. She took a picture with Muggsy Bogues (at 5 foot 3 the shortest player to ever play in the NBA) and reminded us that “even here you can find evidence showing size is not the only thing that matters.” I also remember that when I was very much concerned about how to ship our hundreds of boxes of data from Maryland to UNCG, Cathy walked into the lab and said casually, “let’s rent a U-Haul.” Just like that, we loaded two big U-Haul trucks and drove them to UNCG! ... There are so many stories like these. Cathy certainly left us so much more to enrich our lives than scholarship. That is why we love her so much!

Cathy, we have had such a great run over the years of scholarship, research, and education, with lots of fun! We will continue the work that you started. That is how we will remember you!