



Faculty Portrait: Dr. Harold Hild, Communication

This issue of the CTL Bulletin starts a new occasional feature in which we interview a faculty member at Northeastern about pertinent issues of teaching and learning at NEIU and in higher education in general. Given his many years of distinguished service and the prominent role in faculty governance he has played, we thought it only fitting to begin this feature with Dr. Harold Hild, professor of Communication, Media & Theatre and chair of the department. In 1974 he founded and became the first coordinator of the English Language Program. Most of his research and articles deal with writing and literature, although he has written and published poetry as well. He has served as President of the Nat. Assoc. for Developmental Educ. Here is a summary of Dr. Hild's responses to our questions.

For better or for worse, what do you see as the most important change in higher education—at NEIU or in general—over the years on which you can look back?

The best thing that Northeastern has done for higher education in Chicago is to provide access to college for so many people who had largely been excluded from getting a college degree, including minorities and returning students. The most regrettable thing I have experienced over the years is the deterioration of civil discourse, especially among faculty. Everything has become so polarized; there often is no real communication. When I started, there was still a productive discourse possible between the older and the younger generation of faculty. You could disagree, but you would still have lunch with the people you disagreed with.

If you were President of NEIU, which one thing would you change or do more of?

We suffer from a lack of community on our campus. When I was teaching at Loyola, there was a stronger sense of community between faculty and students. People did more things together. They'd have a beer together, played baseball together; there were more activities to get students involved. The only place I have seen this here is the CASEP program with its emphasis on cohorts of students going through the program together. The new First-Year Experience that's being launched right now is also a good step in this direction.

What are your thoughts about General Education: What should its function be, and should it be changed from what it is today?

The original idea of General Education was to create the feeling of having something in common, a common core of knowledge and culture. The rationale for our current program is merely political. Each department just gets a piece of the pie. It doesn't address the needs of the students. Our students need to

develop skills. They are terrible at listening. They are the TIVO-generation that has gotten used to being able to replay everything they hear and see. We have too many courses in our Gen-Ed program because of the turf issues. The University should develop the will to decide what the core is and limit the program to that. Give the other departments more electives to make up for lost Gen-Ed turf.

What's the most important thing about teaching you have learned in your years as a professor?

It's all about your attitude toward the content and toward students. Students need to see you are passionate about your content. The way students think is: "I can see that Dr. Hild cares about poetry. If he thinks it's important, then I should too." Students aren't empty vessels. They come with a lot of knowledge and concepts to your class. Professors aren't creating knowledge as much as they are restructuring the knowledge students come with. We need to give a structure to what students already bring with them.

What advice would you give a new faculty member coming to our campus?

Be flexible. You have to be willing and able to adapt. There is one thing you can be sure of: Whatever your plans are, it's not going to happen that way!

What should be the role of research and scholarship at a teaching institution such as ours?

I started out at NEIU teaching Shakespeare. It didn't take me long to figure out that the world didn't need yet another brilliant article on Shakespeare. But what would be helpful is doing research on how Shakespeare can be made to speak to today's students. The emphasis on content is no more important than the emphasis on the teaching process. Research at a teaching institution should be about teaching your subject matter better to your students. But that research can't just look at teaching methodology in the abstract--it needs to be grounded in the discipline itself. In our classes students need to learn how the discipline works, and a faculty member has to have thought about this carefully before he or she can make it clear to the students.

Student retention & graduation rates have been a big issue on our campus. Any thoughts on that?

We need to find a way to offer more courses when our students can take them. This is a problem of availability and of scheduling of classes. We also need to need to rethink our convoluted catalogue and the many outdated requirements we put on our students.

Where do you see higher education twenty years from now?

I usually have a pretty good sense of where things are going, but this is difficult... I don't really know. One thing I don't want to see is everything being delivered through distance education, even though there is a place for distance ed. I see a mixture of technology-mediated and face-to-face teaching. The latter will remain important because we all remember the important teachers in our lives. And their impact came through modeling and personal interaction. We need a balance between good researchers and good teachers. We've got to stop being everything to everybody. We have to find out what we can do best and then do it better than anybody else! For example, the most important thing I have helped with is to make Northeastern a Hispanic Serving Institution. We have Latino students graduating from NEIU and moving into important jobs in the region. One thing we could do more of is to focus on taking minority students, who never thought of themselves as college achievers, and make sure they graduate with top skills and are ready for a bright future.