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# Walter Nord as Intellectual and Pedagogical Hero

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*This marks the first of a new AMLE feature that will highlight the careers of the annual recipients of the Academy of Management's Distinguished Educator Award. The 2002 recipient was Walter Nord of the University of South Florida.*

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My association with Walt Nord is intricate and indelible. Like him, I received my doctorate in psychology from Washington University and taught my first courses there. Like him—or more likely, because of him—my scholarship is eclectic, drawing from domains typically not associated with mainstream organizational behavior. When my paper (with Wayne Eastman) was accepted by Peter Frost for *Organization Science's* "Crossroads," it was Walt who was asked to comment (which he did, of course, to great effect, aided by his wife/colleague/friend Ann Connell). When I assumed the post vacated by the great Peter Vaill here at GWU, I found that Nord's *Concepts and Controversy* had been the program's standard text for 25 years.

When I was his doctoral student in the mid 1980s, Walter encouraged me to take courses outside of management and psychology—such as those taught by the influential intellectual historian Gerald Izenberg, the renowned literary critic and author William Gass, and the Nobel Prize winning economic historian Douglass North—and assigned books by such "alternative" thinkers as Thomas Sowell, Tibor Scitovsky, and Richard Edwards. He also arranged an OB speaker series that lent us puny doctoral students opportunity to spend time with such luminaries as David Whetten, Richard Hackman, Max Bazerman, and Jeff Pfeffer. A paper of his own that he was particularly proud of (and which would later be published in the *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 1992) was "Alvin W. Gouldner as Intellectual Hero," in which Walt paid homage to the brilliant and controversial sociologist and held him up as a model for emulation. Having known Walter now for 20 years (yes, Walt, 20!), the sublime balance he's struck between consequential scholarship, meaningful teaching, sage service, and tender mentoring never ceases to aston-

ish me. I can assert with all certainty that Walter is the veritable embodiment of all of the qualities he so admired in Gouldner, and genuinely deserves the title "Intellectual and Pedagogical Hero." I know he's mine.

## BACKGROUND

**When and where were you born? What was your family structure (i.e., birth order and gender mix)? What did your parents do for a living, and how did that impact the course your life and career has taken?**

I was born in Mt. Kisco, New York in 1939; I am an only child. My father was a pipe fitter with the New York Central Railroad. My mother's job was, to quote Dr. Laura, "my kid's mom." When I was young, she occasionally did house cleaning and laundry for various people. Later, when I was in college, she had full-time clerical positions—the latest one with *Reader's Digest*. I was very fortunate in that my parents made substantial sacrifices for me to get my education.

**Are there any experiences or episodes in your youth, including your studies at Williams College and Cornell University, that sparked your interest in organizational psychology? If so, explain them and how they influenced you.**

Williams College was a fantastic place to be, although nothing I did there directed me to organizational psychology. I majored in economics and took a lot of political science, but did not take any psychology. The economics and political science helped to broaden my focus beyond what I think it would have been if I had just gone on in psychology. This breadth became a major factor in my future work.

A major influence on me at Williams was my sophomore roommate, a man named Edmund "Tad" Day. Before I roomed with Tad, my approach to learning had been pretty mechanical and not very thoughtful. His intellect, enthusiasm, and critical thinking provided a stimulating alternative; I changed so much that I moved from being a "C" student my freshman year to making the Dean's List as a sophomore.

My interest in trade unions and labor market economics led me to go to the Industrial and Labor Relations School at Cornell for my masters. By chance my graduate teaching assistantship was with an organizational psychologist, Dr. Ned Rosen. He served as an important mentor to me; it was he who suggested that I pursue a doctorate in psychology. More than that, he took the initiative to write letters to recommend me to a number of psychology departments. Since at that time, I did not have any prior work in psychology, most of the prestigious programs were not interested in me. Fortunately, Washington University offered a wide exposure to all fields of psychology as a major requirement for the first year and they took a chance on me.

Another important event at Cornell was a required course in what then was called Human Relations. The instructor, Larry Williams, was an outstanding and exciting teacher. Thanks to this course and the mentorship of Ned Rosen, I eventually majored in the emerging field of organizational behavior.

Also, in Professor Williams' course, I really began to resonate with the content of the field. At the time, the work of Maslow, Herzberg, and Argyris was in the ascendance, and I appreciated the apparent potential of their ideas for "democratizing" organizations. It was this promise that attracted me to the field and would later disappoint me, because of its failure to deliver. It was this failure that moved me to study Karl Marx. I eventually became known for my critical writing on Marx. In short, Cornell was a wonderful experience for me.

**Describe what it was like to study at, and then teach at, Washington University in the 1960s and 1970s. I ask because it was a hotbed of social theory in those days.**

Washington University was also a wonderful experience for me. I was there so long and so many important things happened for me there, that it is hard to avoid having this total interview devoted to those things. Since I was, at first, a student there and then my early faculty experience was there

also, I will comment in two parts, bridged by a transition.

### Student

First, my assistantship was with Dr. Richard Willis, an experimental social psychologist who was doing some interesting work on conformity and anticonformity. Eventually, my dissertation grew out of this experience. The experience also introduced me to the research techniques of laboratory social psychology.

Second, and perhaps the most important thing, I met Ann Feagan who eventually became Ann Nord and now is writing with me under the name of Ann Connell. In addition to being a great friend and wonderful wife, Ann has a world-class mind, and throughout my career has been a very important source of social support and intellectual stimulation. I personally think that the work I am doing with her right now is the best I have done and I am eager to finish the book we are working on to see if others agree.

Third, at Washington University I was fortunate to receive a fellowship in the community mental health program that was led by John Glidewell. He became my dissertation chair, and his expertise in sensitivity training opened my eyes to aspects of applied social psychology that otherwise I would have missed.

Fourth, at the time, the social psychology program at Washington was quite small and offered very few courses. That turned out to be a bad news/good news situation. The good news is that the vacuum allowed me to do a lot of course work outside of the psychology department. Fortunately, at the time, Washington University had one of the top sociology departments in the country (the "hotbed" of social theory you referred to) led by such outstanding scholars as Alvin Gouldner, Robert Hamblin, and Joseph Kahl. Two of the professors I took courses from in the sociology department Gouldner and Hamblin, were responsible for some of my early successful writing. Hamblin was a superb teacher who introduced me to Skinnerian psychology and social exchange theory. Gouldner was an awesome thinker; the critique of social science that he was developing then helped to shape my thinking for my early work on Marx.

### Transition

Following my student days at Washington University, as your question indicates, I continued on there as a teacher in business school.

There was a serendipitous transition event. I had

assumed I would be going into psychology and was not considering joining a business school faculty. However, one day, Dr. Willis presented a talk at the WU business school and gave them a hard time about their failure to have hired behavioral scientists who, at that time, were beginning to make their way into business schools. They told him, "Send us one." He arranged for me to walk across campus for an interview; I was hired. Part of my reason for staying at Washington was my interest in social exchange theory, which, at the time, was being advanced by a number of people there in addition to Hamblin.

### Faculty

My experiences on the WU faculty were as important, if not more so, than my experiences as a student. Just as with the psychology department, many of the positive things that happened were because of the small number of people on campus in my area of interest. Since I was the first and only behavioral scientist in the business school, I had a great deal of latitude.

There were few traditions to constrain me. In fact, when I was assigned to teach the introductory MBA organization behavior course, Sterling Schoen—who had taught and continued to teach that course—told me, "We've hired you to introduce behavioral science into the school. Please develop an outline for what you think we should do in the course." I did this. Of course, all I knew was psychology and social psychology, so I included a great deal of them, even proposing that we have the students read *Walden Two*. Sterling was extremely supportive and enthusiastic and we worked together for many years continuing to develop that course. For the most part, my other teaching assignments entailed similar encouragement to innovate.

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Then, another extremely important event happened: During my second year on the faculty, Karl Hill was hired from the Tuck School to be the new dean of the business school. Karl seemed to recognize I had the potential to do good work and helped make it possible for me to do almost anything I wanted. He also realized that academic success was, to a degree, a function of writing ability. He therefore hired a writing consultant, Jane Warren, for the faculty. At about that time, out of the or-

ganizational behavior course, I began to develop the first edition of *Concepts and Controversy in Organizational Behavior* (1972/1976). Although the book was an edited one, I did write a couple of papers specifically for it. More than help to improve these and other documents, Jane's diligence and competence helped me to improve my writing significantly. The long-term positive effects of that experience have been great; not only for my own writing, but also for my ability to coach students.

Although as a student I did not work too much with Hyman Meltzer, soon after I joined the faculty in the business school, he and I became good friends and colleagues. He too was very supportive of my work and invited me to give him feedback on his work at the time; eventually this led to invitations to work on projects with him, such as the book *Making Organizations Humane and Productive* (1981) and the founding of the interdisciplinary program in organizational behavior, where I met you.

Another important event at Washington University took place when Ken Runyon, an excellent doctoral student, brought me a book by Robert Tucker that he was studying for a sociology class. Ken told me that he was amazed by the similarity between what he was reading about Marx and what he had studied in the introductory organizational behavior class about Maslow, Herzberg, and so forth, and he suggested that I read the Tucker book. That book made it clear to me that the humanistic side of organizational behavior/theory that, until then, I had been treating almost exclusively as a psychologist, had important political/economic dimensions to it that must be dealt with. The work on my first Marx paper began with this.

While at Washington University, I had the opportunity to visit two other universities—the University of British Columbia at Vancouver and Northwestern. Both of these experiences were extremely beneficial. At Vancouver, I met Peter Frost and Vance Mitchell and we developed the first edition of *Organizational Reality: Reports from the Firing Line* (1978/1992). Vance was great to work with, and Peter is a fantastic colleague and we continue to work together. While at Northwestern, I taught a doctoral seminar, or perhaps better yet, with the students I had in the seminar such as Jill Graham, Ralph Stablein, and Jim Walsh, we taught each other. Although, of the three I have only written with Ralph, the relationships I developed with these people have been very enjoyable and important as time has gone on.

Highlighting some themes from all this, Washington University provided me with the chance to benefit from outstanding and thoughtful scholars, very supportive people, and flexibility.

## SCHOLARLY ORIENTATION

To understand you as an educator, it is, in my mind, necessary to first understand your scholarly perspective. Of all the careers I can think of, yours is one of the most difficult to characterize. That is, you seem to have eschewed a narrow conception of "research program" for a more expansive one. Where does that eclecticism come from, and how does it benefit the way you approach writing and teaching?

I think what I said above about Williams, Cornell, and Washington point to the sources of the eclecticism. To elaborate a bit—I was a liberal arts undergraduate and had a great deal of opportunity to explore and go my own way in graduate school. Also, the thinkers I was exposed to throughout had an important impact. Surprisingly, one of the earliest contacts with such a person was with my high school Latin teacher, Mr. Sullivan. My senior year in high school we had to write a term paper for a social studies course; he, somehow, stimulated me to write on Marx's concept of the state and also the work of the anarchist Kropkin.

As to the benefits, I think the eclecticism increases the likelihood that I am going to be open to new ideas and able to tie things together in ways that other people often are not. If nothing else, it makes reading and study of diverse perspectives a lot more fun and seemingly more meaningful. Also, I am a Myers-Briggs INTP.

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As a follow-up to the previous question, two of your papers, *Beyond the Teaching Machine: The Neglected Area of Operant Condition in the Theory and Practice of Management* (1969) and *The Failure of Current Applied Behavioral Science: A Marxian Perspective* (1974), have become classics. How do you square such drastically different intellectual tacks?

Of all the things I have been asked about my academic orientation, the tension that people see between Skinnerianism and Marxism has provoked the most curiosity. In some ways, I can see why. Certainly if one takes the popular caricatures of each, they do seem very difficult to reconcile. But, from my perspective, I see some strong rapprochements in that both provide ways for humans

to gain greater control of their outcomes. In this light, the essence of both the papers you mentioned were really challenges to the applied humanistic psychology of the time. Admittedly, the challenges were very different, but examining the operant conditioning paper, in context of the times, it was suggesting that if people want to enrich jobs they might consider using variable schedules and/or intrinsic reinforcers. The Marxist paper too, was an effort to broaden the conventional approach that was en vogue for providing meaningful, and "empowered" work. Of course this paper, more than the Skinnerian one, implicitly suggested that the interest expressed in the conventional view to provide such work, was not as sincere as it may have appeared to many. Thus, implicitly, if one was "really" interested in making such changes, one would need to become more politically and economically informed and active.

Also, there was a more substantive overlap. Both papers were implicitly humanistic; they suggested that humans do in fact control their own outcomes and social science can be helpful in the process. Somewhat surprisingly, this view suggests that, contrary to the view that according to Skinnerian psychology individual humans are controlled, at a collective level it, it implies—without explaining why they might wish to do so—if humans do want to exercise control over the nature of human experience, Skinnerian psychology, by guiding social decision, may be the tool for doing so.

Which of your papers do you think are the most important, and why?

This is the most difficult question you've asked for several reasons. First, evaluating importance has both personal and academic dimensions. To answer your question I need to comment on both dimensions separately and will not attempt to add them together.

### Personal

With respect to the personal dimension, probably the first paper I published, which came out of my dissertation on conformity and exchange theory was published in the *Psychological Bulletin*. That was very important to me in revealing that personally I could do work that would get published in leading journals. Then, the operant conditioning paper was important because it began to get people in my field to recognize me and to maybe even value what I might have to say. Plus, it was widely reprinted and opened the doors to a number of professional networks.

*Concepts and Controversies*, although an edited teaching book, was also extremely important personally because it led the people at Vancouver to be interested in inviting me to visit there. (I have already indicated how important that was.) Finally, the Marx paper discussed in the previous question was also important because it too brought me into contact with a number of like minds and provided great intellectual excitement for me personally.

### **Academic Importance**

I am uncomfortable evaluating the academic importance because doing so risks me presuming that any of my papers in fact had an absolute importance. Accordingly, I will base my answer on two types of information: (a), feedback from others, and (b), my own judgment *vis-à-vis* my own standards—in other words, which papers I think are best.

### **Feedback From Others**

I suspect that the operant conditioning paper has been the most often cited and certainly the one people have said the most positive things about. In fact, once Fred Luthans, who I believe did so much to advance this perspective, told me that he found this paper extremely useful in his own work. In addition, the paper was reprinted several times in places I am proud to have it appear.

In addition, the Marx paper is one I have received frequent compliments on and reports from people that it has influenced their thinking in productive ways. It is also a paper that has been frequently cited, occasionally reprinted and one that has led people to invite me to various colloquia. In fact, it is one of the reasons that Northwestern was interested in having me visit.

### **Personal Judgment**

All of my papers that I think are potential candidates for being most important are conceptual. Conceptual papers that I judge to be important are ones that are fully researched and develop persuasive arguments to move the people out of any limitations inherent in mainstream ways of thinking at the time. Based on these criteria, I think the Skinnerian paper and the Marx paper and the related *American Psychologist* paper on "Job Satisfaction Reconsidered" (1977) are potential candidates. Also using these criteria, I think my recent papers with Connell (e.g., Connell & Nord, 1996) advancing an agnostic stance from which to develop a better philosophy for organization studies

qualify as candidates. This latter work is more recent and we have published it in less widely read journals, so its impact thus far has been limited. However, the book that we hope to publish in the next year or so will turn out to be my most important work.

### **Educational Approach**

#### **What is your teaching philosophy, and how do you tie that to classroom technique?**

The idea of a teaching philosophy seems to imply that I work from some conscious template. Actually, for me, the process is much more Weickian—that is, more of a retrospective reconstruction of the actions I have taken. Basically, I tend to be (based on self-report and comments of others) a very supportive, low judgmental person and, as noted above, I'm a Meyers-Briggs INTP. I value creativity and latitude and hate details. I do not like to be controlled or to control others. I also like diverse ideas and I value good thinking. Accordingly, where I can, I do not use a typical textbook; instead I assign a variety of "point-of-view" books. In class, I lecture very little and try to foster discussion. Even with moderately large classes, say 35 students or so, I have been able to use a quasi-seminar technique where I ask the students to come to class prepared with questions or information for discussion about what they consider to be important, interesting ideas from the reading. I add my own questions and, as much as possible, run the whole class off of these questions. Also, I have increasingly gone to take-home examinations, and one of my favorite questions is, "What is the most important thing you have learned from this course? Why is it important? How do you plan to use it?" I have just graded the most recent set of answers to this and I was amazed that of 35 students, so many of them chose a different topic for the most important thing. Such an event certainly, if any challenge was necessary, challenges the value of what Postman and Weingartner (1969) called the "Milk Pitcher Theory of Education."

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### ***I value creativity and latitude and hate details.***

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**As always, Walt, you defy pigeon holing. Let me ask this: Do you have a preference for teaching bachelors, masters, or doctoral students, and if so, why?**

Actually, at this point, I do not have a clear preference. I do, however, find each group enjoy-

able in a different way. In my experience, undergraduate students often have never been exposed to the experience of serious critical thinking and watching them do it for the "first time" is very rewarding—often I can really see the results.

Masters students (and here I am thinking mostly about MBA students) force me to think about how what I am teaching might be useful in the "real world." They also bring in experiences from the "real world" from which I learn.

Doctoral students force me and allow me to learn about the most recent literature in the field and therefore, often stimulate me to read and study things I should have read but have not and probably would not unless I was teaching them. Thus, I often feel I benefit a great deal from teaching doctoral seminars.

**When I was your doctoral student at Washington University, your PhD seminars were generally "student run." That is, you would determine the readings, but students had to choose topics and then lead the discussion. What was your intent behind that method?**

The "student run" idea that you refer to I basically commented on previously. This was an approach I have gravitated to over the years as my answer there implied. I personally find such an approach the most enjoyable; I have used it widely and found that students seem to respond very well to it too and often learn a great deal as a result. Thus, it has turned out to be a win-win-win and it is just something that I do that is fun and seems to work. I do not know of any particular intent behind the method.

**What qualities do you feel are most important for an effective educator?**

In *Mind-Set Management*, Sam Culbert (1996) introduced the idea of defining successful advice giving in terms of win-win-win. Without going into detail, such outcomes occur when the interests of the advice giver, the recipient, and the organization are all met simultaneously.

Using this framework, the effective educator creates conditions when his/her interests and those of the organization are achieved as well as those of the student. In my particular case, my ideal is when I have introduced the student to quality/timely academic material and given quality feedback that I feel helps him/her improve his/her academic competencies. The organization goals are achieved when the students attain skills and orientations that enable them to perform successfully

once they leave the university. And from the students' points of view I believe they develop passion about, confidence in, and enthusiasm for the subject matter. In short, when a person can achieve these outcomes consistently, I think he/she is being an effective educator, at least in the university setting.

**To the critical professorial tension, how does your scholarship inform your teaching, and visa versa?**

Implicitly, I think I have answered this question above. Basically, I value learning about different perspectives and challenging conventional thinking. I try to introduce these materials into the classroom. Also, following up on my Jane Warren experiences (described previously), I really believe that good thinking and good writing go together. Thus, I try to provide guidance for students to structure their writing.

The teaching influences my scholarship most directly through what I have learned from students. Above I have indicated how MBA students force me to think more pragmatically than I often do and how this has been a source of learning. Also, I have mentioned the impact that Ken Runyon had on me at Washington University.

## CONCLUSION

**You're an award-winning scholar and are known for your service to the field and to the institutions that you serve. Now your teaching has been internationally recognized. What wisdom can you pass to others for achieving such exquisite balance in their careers?**

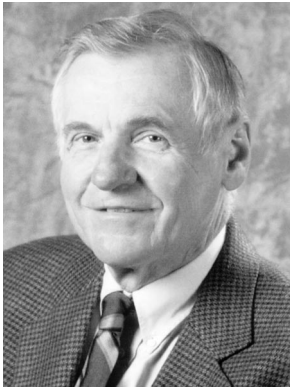
Those are very nice words and I hope that they really do describe me.

I am not sure that I can give any advice that people can use ahead of time to exercise control over things, but there are a few things that have been very helpful to me. First, throughout what I have said so far, you can see that I have been very fortunate to be around smart and supportive people. Perhaps the supportive dimension deserves more weight in making decisions about where to work and locate than it normally receives. Of course, using it is not always possible. Among other things, people do not choose their parents. I was lucky there too. A second thing is that I have been fortunate to be around smart, thoughtful people who question things. It may be possible to make choices about location by looking for such environments. Third, I have been fortunate to be in

locations that did not have strong structures and pressures pushing me in any particular direction. This really fit me, although it may not fit others. In any case, the moral might be to pursue the things that interest you when they are hot for you.

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**Walter R. Nord**, (PhD psychology, Washington University, 1967) is Distinguished University Professor and professor of management, University of South Florida. Previously he was at Washington University-St. Louis (1967-1989). He has published widely in scholarly journals and edited/authored a number of books. He co-edited the *Handbook of Organization Studies* (with S. Clegg and C. Hardy) that received the 1997 George Terry Award. Nord is coeditor of *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, past and present book review editor, *Academy of Management Review*, and an editorial board member of *Organization and Environment* and *Organization*. He has served as consultant on organizational development and change for a variety of groups and organizations. His current interests center on developing an agnostic philosophical framework for social science.



**James Bailey** is professor of organizational behavior at George Washington University and visiting professor at London Business School. He has received numerous teaching awards, including the David L. Bradford Outstanding Educator Award. His scholarship has appeared in such outlets as *Organizational Science*, the *Journal of International Business Studies* and the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. Professor Bailey is currently associate editor of the *Academy of Management Learning and Education*.