Some time during my first Fulbright fellowship in the Philippines, in the early 1990s, I wondered aloud to people in charge of the program here, Why should this kind of exchange opportunity be confined to recognizably elite institutions, such as UP Diliman and Ateneo where I was then posted? Challenged during the course of the little argument that followed to offer a constructive alternative, I mentioned the schools in Manila’s University Belt. Surely there was an important constituency to be served there as well?

So when asked this time around whether I would consider an assignment to the University of the East, I found it hard to say no: it would have felt like declining my own invitation. Even so, before accepting I found myself reviewing the points made by my opponents in that earlier mini-debate, about the need for placing exchange professors for maximum impact, about disparities in academic environment and working conditions, etc. And I entertained a few questions of my own. Would I be welcome at a place like UE? Would I find enough in common with my colleagues, and enough support from the administration, to work comfortably and effectively there? Above all, could I reach the university’s students—or rather, in keeping with the “learning-centered” pedagogy I hoped to implement, could we reach each other: I with professional knowledge and passionate concern for a subject matter, they with a genuine desire to encounter that subject matter, born from their own background and interests?
Now that the semester is over, I’m pleased to report that all doubts have been erased. Not only has this time at UE given confirmation to my side in that earlier debate; it has turned out to be one of the most rewarding and even joyful teaching and learning experiences I have ever been part of.

The first two of the questions that gave me pause, about being welcomed and finding a congenial working environment, were soon put to rest. College of Arts and Sciences Dean Carmelita Flores and her staff extended warm support from the start. After spending some time inadvertently isolated in the “Chairs’ Room” of the CAS Faculty Lounge, I heeded a bit of well placed advice to “get out more,” and discovered colleagues who are seeking, as I am, to fashion teaching practices more conducive to student learning; subsequently, a group of them made the offer to deepen the discussion over dinner and drinks. A final sign of fitting in came when the security guards at Gast Ambide gate, who for some time seemed to hear “Visiting Terrorist” when I said “Visiting Professor,” began to greet my arrival with sunny smiles and “opo sir’s.”

The other, more pressing question, about making connection with the students here, took longer to be resolved. Actually, the gap to be bridged was probably less than might have been the case with some other exchange professors. For one thing, my previous experience in the Philippines (together with being married to a Filipina and knowing a smattering of Tagalog) could be counted upon to cushion the impact of any cultural differences. Then, too, I teach now at a distinctly non-elite school in the States, where the students display a wide range of backgrounds and capabilities, and are strongly oriented to education in support of their career choices. I expected, and found, this profile to match fairly closely with that of the UE student population. Still, uncertainties
about proficiency in English, about background for literary study, and about level of interest in the literature of another country in another time, hovered over the course I was slated to offer, EN308, on American writing 1900-1945.

My plan for meeting these challenges involved, first of all, a syllabus that started with the “user-friendly” poetry of Robert Frost and culminated with Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is In the Heart*, a crossover work of both American and Philippine literature. The second but more basic aspect of the plan was to deploy a range of “learning-centered” strategies. Among these were 1) finding out through ongoing diagnostic exercises where the students are actually at (as opposed to where the professor thinks they are) with respect to knowledge of subject matter and the development of relevant skills; 2) devising active, creative, collaborative learning experiences of the kind best suited to spark students’ engagement with the material and allow them to learn as much as possible on their own and from each other; and 3) encouraging a personal stake in learning, for intrinsic motives relating to individual interests and life goals rather than extrinsic ones such as grades and peer or parental approval.

Each of these measures revealed, initially, the extent of the challenge facing both myself and the students in reaching the course objectives. At the same time, they defined the paths through which progress was made or could be observed. I want to refer to them now in briefly telling the story of the course: how what began in challenge ended, generally, in achievement and joy.

First off, early diagnostic exercises disclosed a good deal of basic competence and one or two cases of unusual sensitivity in the art of literary interpretation. They also disclosed some wildly fanciful (let’s call them) readings, including one of Robert Frost’s
quietly meditative “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” as a poem about a stalker seeking revenge on an unfaithful lover. In addition, other feedback from students contained the blunt declaration, “I hate literature!” together with a much larger number of admissions from those who felt they had little or no preparation for literary study, were insecure to the point of paralysis in their written and spoken English skills, and were scared to death about what was going to happen to them in this course.

Little by little, over the course of the semester, these alarming indications moderated if they did not entirely disappear. In a final self-assessment piece, the proponent of the stalker theory of “Stopping by Woods” was able to laugh at that earlier “very wrong” interpretation, and in the final exam showed how far he had come by offering a sensible and at points insightful analysis of another Frost poem. The hater of literature found a couple of works to her liking and gradually reversed a pattern of missed classes and unsubmitted work, becoming a solid and even enthusiastic class citizen. As best as I can tell, the size of the under-confident group within the class shrunk over the course of the semester. The either panicked or glassy-eyed look that I observed on so many faces in the first class sessions seemed in most cases gradually to give way to an expression of interest, and by the end of the class the great majority reported having achieved the course objectives, at least to their own satisfaction.

“Active, creative, collaborative” learning got off to a bit of a rocky start, as well. The first assignment of this kind, a recitation from memory of one of two Frost poems, “After Apple-Picking” and “The Tuft of Flowers,” called for students to be divided into groups, depending on which poem they had chosen. While reorganizing the seating, it occurred to me to specify a third group, those who were “not prepared to do the
recitation”—figuring to keep the performing groups from being slowed down by the few laggards who had not done the memorization work. Busy with the room arrangements and with a handout for the activity, I did not see until I looked up about three-quarters of the class huddled into the space designated for the non-prepareds. Thinking it unlikely that that number of students had failed to do the assignment, I asked what was up. After an exchange of hesitant glances, it came out that the memorization had in fact been done, but the members of this largest group had decided they were “not prepared” to recite for other reasons: confusion, nerves, and, in a couple of cases, suddenly sore throats. It was a delicate moment. In retrospect, the fate of the whole larger learning-centered approach lay in the balance. Reassuring them that this was indeed a group activity, in which individuals would receive the support of classmates in the event of memory lapses during recitation, and holding out the prospect of being able to use “props” (a bowl of apples and a cutting board adorned with a tuft of flowers, imported from the professor’s kitchen) to enhance the performance, I succeeded in cajoling even the sore-throat victims into participating.

The results exceeded expectations, certainly the expectations of that reluctant beginning. The recitations were spirited, the props used in some cases ingeniously (with the apples finding uses after the class), and a kind of natural high began to build as the students discovered they were capable of making the poems come to life. Reflecting later on this activity, one said “the students will not easily forget the details” of a work not only read but performed: “every sequence will be mastered,” “every meaning fully understood.” Another made a brilliant linkage between the kind of interplay between individual and community that took place in the groups and the theme of “The Tuft of
Flowers,” which Frost called his “fellowship” poem. What’s more, the momentum from this activity carried forward into enthusiasm both for performance and for group work, in enactments of scenes from the play Our Town (for which the students came up with their own props) and in adaptations of Fitzgerald’s novel The Great Gatsby for such new media as music videos and computer games.

To encourage intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, the course featured a “personal learning objective” requirement. In the list of learning objectives contained in the syllabus, one blank was left, to be filled in by students with a goal of their own, related to their career needs or curiosity, to be achieved by taking the class. When the time came for preliminary conferences to talk about the “PLO,” consternation reigned. “This was the first time I was asked to submit such a requirement,” one student later wrote. “I was not sure what was expected of me.” In addition, the prospect of a mandatory face-to-face meeting with the instructor was apparently novel enough to be unsettling. “People are asking,” one ingenuous conferee confided, “What does he want with us? Have we done something wrong?”

But personal learning proved to be one of the most gratifying outcomes of the course. In the same written report in which she confessed initial bewilderment over the requirement, the student went on to detail how she eventually fulfilled it: by adapting various techniques of learning-centered pedagogy that she had become exposed to in the class to her own teaching practicum with high-school students. Another had formulated the goal of enriching her abilities to do original criticism (as opposed to first going to the internet or other outside sources to see what the experts think), and was planning to put herself to the test in a certifiably original final essay comparing “modern” sonnets
encountered in the course readings to Shakespeare’s sonnets written hundred of years before. A more modest goal was expressed by a Korean student: not confident in his English and shy by nature, he simply wanted to be able to speak his mind on the literature we were considering, if only in small-group discussions. But when we took up *The Great Gatsby*, the question whether Gatsby should be regarded as a materialist or an idealist caught this young man’s ethical imagination, and he became a leader of discussion in the overall class.

Sometimes the personal learning took unexpected turns. One student, enrolled in the Education program but actually planning to work in a call center after graduation, vowed to pay special attention to references to business in the assigned readings. After doing that, he made the discovery that he was not really interested in business, call centers included. Instead, largely as a result of reading Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* and sensing the importance of its messages for Filipino youth today, he found himself re-committing to his original career intention, “TEACHING.”

Other developmental experiences took place off the map altogether. One student received a severe penalty for plagiarizing an essay assignment. In his final PLO report, he abandoned his earlier objective and wrote instead of what he had learned about honesty and professionalism from this incident. As if to prove the lesson had sunk in, he focused his final essay on an episode of alleged plagiarism that nearly ruined Bulosan’s career in the U.S. Another set out to explore religious themes in the literature, an admirable goal given his strong personal faith, and he reported movingly on that exploration to his classmates at the end of the course. But along the way he also discovered an unexpected enjoyment in reading. Never having read a novel before the
class, he told me privately that he had started another on his own, which, in spite of a busy schedule of classes, church activities, and business responsibilities, he was determined to finish.

Now, I don’t want to leave the impression that the story of the class is an unbroken string of successful turnarounds. Limitations, and outright failures, are a part of any human enterprise, and EN308 was no exception. While its size shrank, there remained a significant core of students whose skills, whether in literary study or expression, never progressed beyond the basic level at best. Then, too, while the class took to performance like ducks to water, serious floundering occurred when it came to the writing of a full-fledged critical essay (an outcome for which the instructor must bear a full share of responsibility). At the individual level, a small number of students fell by the wayside and did not complete the requirements of the course; one who showed great initial promise (as much raw critical talent as I have seen in a student at this level) mysteriously fizzled out in later assignments and finished with an undistinguished grade; and quite a number ran afoul of plagiarism rules (this I believe is an issue of academic culture at UE that needs to be addressed), without the opportunity or in some cases the willingness to rehabilitate themselves as that one lesson-learner did.

At the same time, such shortfalls ought not to diminish what was accomplished here. Certainly these UE students answered my initial concern: they proved up to the challenge of learning-centered pedagogy. More than that, they demonstrated some of the most fundamental tenets of this approach to education. With their openness to new things, their willingness to accept personal responsibility for learning, and their willingness to be changed, in their minds and in their lives, by what they learned, they
lived out the modestly stated but bracing manifesto of pedagogical guru John Tagg, “While not everything is possible, much is.”

These students illustrated a further learning-centered principle, as well, one that may be especially difficult for some of us in the academic profession to grasp: that there is an emotional dimension to learning, equally important as the cognitive dimension. How often over the course of the semester did I return home from teaching to marvel to my wife, “There is such a good feeling in this class!” It’s something I have sensed before, in other classes, but not to this extent. The most vivid display of it took place the day of the final exam. Right after the last student turned in a blue book, I was advised to stand by for another event. Part closing ceremony, part despedida, part fiesta, it featured kilos of food and a series of testimonials, song and dance numbers, and even an oration, all of which had obviously been rehearsed. I was delighted and touched, of course, but in one corner of my mind a murmur of objection arose: Surely some of these students, maybe most of them, could have used the time that went into preparing this event for reviewing for the exam?

But then I considered that this was part of the emotion that had fueled the learning for this group right along, that had made, together of course with hard work and determination, so “much” possible for them. I think before this I had acknowledged, without really believing, what learning-centered theories have to say about the role of emotion. My default position was the traditional one: learning is an essentially cognitive activity, to be pursued through discipline and will, with any “good feeling” an extra, a reward for a successful outcome, rather than an integral part of the process. And this view I must have been subtly communicating to my students in the States, who show up
for their final exams in my classes highly focused but hardly ready to party, or to display any emotions other than exhaustion and relief (or despair).

So this is a personal lesson my UE students have taught me. It’s perhaps the surest sign that we did eventually “reach each other” this semester, that the current of learning could flow both ways across the connection we established. And if the lesson concerns learning, by extension it’s about teaching, too—that activity which is in the new educational paradigm much more intimately linked to learning than we have previously understood. For it stands to reason that emotion, and specifically “good feeling” (joy, to call it by its name), has just as integral a role to play in good teaching as do knowledge and pedagogical theory and diligent preparation.

Presumably I already knew this. A definition of “vocation” I am fond of quoting holds that it is the “place where one’s deep joy meets the world’s deep need.” But only thanks to my UE students do I now realize that the emotional element of this definition, like that of the new theories of learning, needs to be not just quoted but believed, and not just believed but lived. And thanks to the past semester at the University I have, perhaps for the first time, experienced my vocation in this sense, as a deep personal joy meeting a deep need in a certain part of the world. I hope there will be more meetings like it, and more encounters with UE and its students, to come.