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# ESL MiniConference

## Consciousness-Raising, One Conversation at a Time

### Achievement Profile: Naomi Ossar



1. What are your main activities these days and in what ways have your ESL experiences inspired or led to these activities?

As you know, I retired in December 2006 from teaching--15 years of ESL in the ELP ([English Language Program](#)), 10 before that in the KSU Department of English as a graduate student and teacher of composition (including one section for international students), introductory literature classes (including children's literature, short story, and fiction). When I retired, I felt it was just the right time, at (what I felt, at least) the top of my game, still in good mental and bodily health.

My main activities these days are only peripherally affected by ESL, e.g. I attended an open meeting at the town library last month, where the issue was how to arrive at a budget for the coming fiscal year, at a time where the town--and the state, for that matter--are millions of dollars in the hole. The town library has been the venue for an ESL program for some time. Its only paid worker is the coordinator; there are many volunteers who tutor immigrants (almost exclusively) one-on-one. The room was full, SRO. The budget items were materials, salaries, hours, benefits, etc. Almost 100% of the attendees had come to the meeting to argue for continuing the ESL program (Miss Pioneer Valley! as well as many foreign students, some with their ESL-student parents). People were

saying they'd be willing to go without some new books, to live with shorter hours, without some magazine subscriptions, if only the library board would restore the \$27,000 they were planning to cut to meet a 1% budget target. As a result of this passionate display, the board decided to cut the summer ESL program but keep the rest, at least for the next year.

I've sat in on a few of the library board's meetings, almost all of them about budgeting. There is going to be a vote May 1 on whether to pass a budget override in order to fund things like police, firefighters, schools--all public services. If it doesn't pass, school classes will get bigger, some teachers will lose their jobs, the library will suffer. Even if it passes, there will be some painful cuts. If it does pass, the funds (as things are set up) will come mostly from property taxes, which means some people, especially retired and elderly, won't be able to afford to live here. So you can see, I'm learning about living in Amherst, Massachusetts. People here tend to bring up local politics even on first meeting. A couple of weeks ago, I met with 150 other citizens in the high school cafeteria to hear from various committees trying to put together a long-term plan for the town that will minimize sprawl while encouraging certain kinds of development. Volunteers spend hours and hours working on basically 7 committees; each committee head reported to the assembly on the committee's objectives. Attendees were polled on priorities and asked for comments.

I've also sat in on some of the 5-member select board meetings, which also include the town manager and often the finance officer. It's a pretty small town but with 5 colleges within 10 miles, so there are many highly educated and civic-minded people who take citizenship and participatory government very seriously.

2. What are some of your most treasured and what are some of your most difficult memories associated with the work you have done in ESL or language and culture teaching and learning in general?

I treasure the friendships of longer or shorter duration that grow out of the teacher-student relationships. When I could, I had students come to my house, usually as a class, sometimes as more than one class, sometimes in smaller groups (e.g. I taught a cooking class in my kitchen several times--also at the International Student Center kitchen). I think it's important and gratifying all around for students to get to know American life by seeing teachers as ordinary people. I was always proud to have students at my house. I also took students to the prairie and the zoo a couple of times. In the classroom, there's plenty of time for drilling and cramming. I also enjoyed teaching special extra classes (this was when we offered a broad range of electives--singing, calligraphy, movies

[one teacher even typed out the dialogue for a scene from Glory], etc., as well as classroom visits) in literature (some poetry, some short stories), calligraphy, cooking. At one time we also offered (and may now, too) a spouse class, usually consisting of women only but including the occasional man. These were much more free-form and varied than our curriculum of reading, writing, listening, speaking. The activities had to be adjusted depending on the makeup of the class, but almost invariably this class was a joy to teach, and the students took a deep interest in one another, in many cases continuing their friendships beyond the class. I loved to see this happen.

Difficult memories are of deadness in the classroom. I was told and also told others with this complaint that it was chemistry, chance. Sometimes no matter how much energy I tried to bring to the classroom, it didn't arc to the students. Sometimes they didn't gel as a class. Sometimes there were lazy or even insolent students who impeded learning. Every teacher has suffered with this, I'm sure. Even now I wouldn't know how to sweeten this kind of situation; I would, as I did in the past, soldier on and hope for a better group the next semester.

3. If you could go back to the moment when you decided to get involved in ESL or language and culture teaching or learning, would you make the same choices?

When my children were small and my husband was just starting up the salary ladder as an instructor, we ran out of money. Just at that time, a friend offered me a teaching job--ESL for army wives and some immigrants at the Adult Learning Center, then located in Northview at the Strong School. The catch was that I had to drive the school bus, too (which turned out to be the department's stepchild--no power brakes or steering, among other defects). Sometimes I took my kids along when they had days off from school. I had never taught before, so I winged it. When I started back to (graduate) school 3 years later, I was given an international section of composition because of the ALC experience. It was my favorite class, usually. I also taught ESL in summers at KSU before the ELP became a separate and year-round department. Would I make the same choices? Initially, of course! I needed a job, and the ALC job fit my schedule as a mother of young children; ditto the summer ESL at KSU.

There was a time when I had to choose whether to stay on at the ELP or return to the English department on a provisional basis: this was during a year when the regular children's literature teacher was on sabbatical and might or might not return. I was told I might get the job permanently if she didn't return, but that I'd be expected to teach 3 big (required by

the education department) classes each semester \*and\* publish. I felt I couldn't do both--teaching and writing--well, that I'd be sacrificing one for the other no matter how I chose. So I decided to stay on at the ELP. But somewhere I regret not getting back to the literature teaching. That is what I was trained for; that was what made me feel most alive. On the other hand, as a trade-off, I got to teach people from exotic places, from whom I could learn a lot--people who in general were more motivated and serious than the average American kids I'd taught before.

4. What would you like to say about today's global context and what a person can do to have a lasting, positive effect on human society?

I'm not much of a joiner (League of Women Voters, committees of any kind). I tend to get impatient or else feel incompetent in groups. So my mode is just to try to be cheerful and kind with one person at a time, to pay attention, be responsive to, one person at a time.

5. Who are the people you would include if you drew a concept map or word web to show the associations, influences, and context in which you have developed your sense of yourself as an ESL or multicultural professional?

Enid Cocke made graduate school sound so delicious that I decided to quit being children's librarian at the Manhattan Public Library and go back to school. She also influenced my decision to apply for the ELP job when I finished graduate school. For the rest, what became my full-time teaching job put me in contact with interesting colleagues, interesting students. I learned from them all. I think what I wrote above explains some more about my development as a teacher of ESL.

6. What is your advice for future ESL teachers?

Relax. Teach in your own style. Students are just as lost as you are and therefore forgiving. You can't know everything about handling a class. In a way students are like babies, who accept and adapt to new experiences. And as a (new) teacher, you're also a baby. Forgive yourself. Enjoy yourself.

Interview by Robb Scott

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