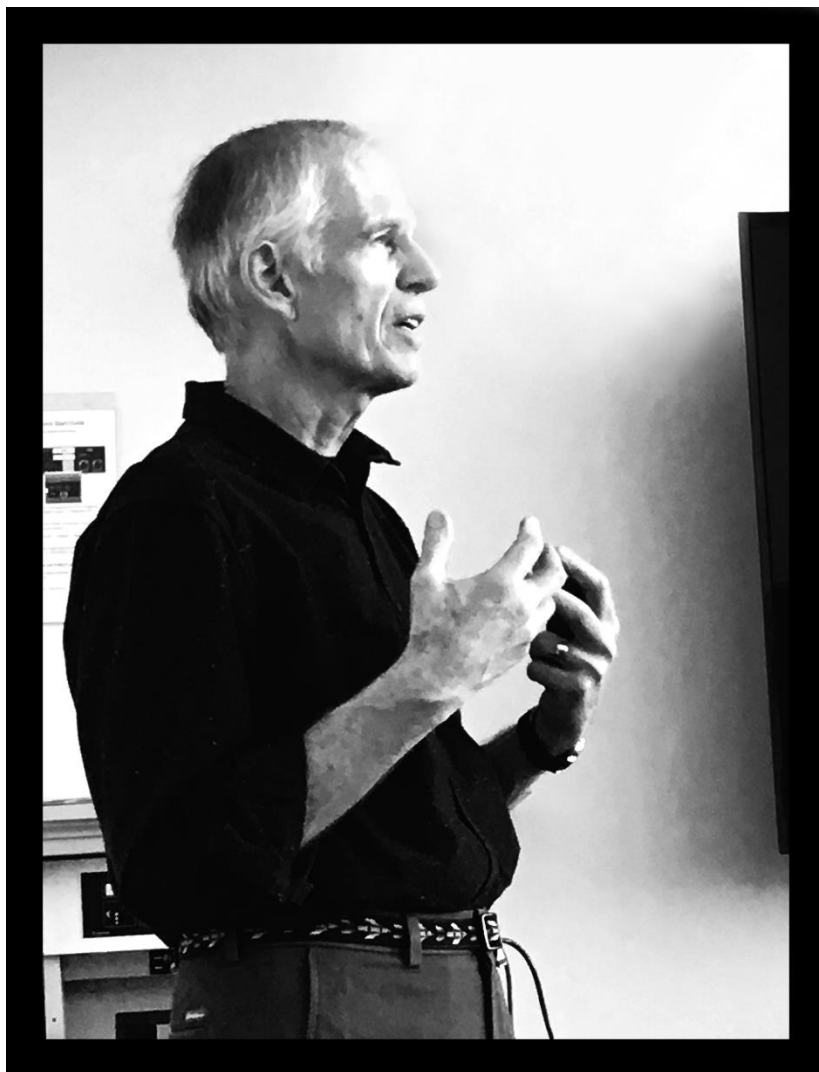


On Teaching and Personal Understandings

An Interview with Dr. Daniel C. Jones



Dr. Jones, longtime music professor at the University of Colorado Boulder, is entering into a phased retirement. I interviewed him about teaching, his origins, methodology, and aspirations, with the hopes of understanding how one of the most effective and enjoyable professors I've had the pleasure of knowing approaches his craft.

So why did you decide to retire?

"It's kind of a confluence of things. So, I'll be 65 in May. My son will be finishing college, so I won't have the bills. He'll be sort of finishing a process and moving onto a new phase of his life. My wife retired a couple years ago. So, it's kind of things coming together in May and June of this year, and you know, maybe the larger contextual reason is I've done this for 25 years and I'm ready to move on."

Do you know what you're going to do moving forward?

"A variety of things. Some stuff we just be for me. I'll do more music, and house/creative projects. I don't sit still well, so to speak, so I can't imagine I'll just be sitting on the deck for hours on end. I'm thinking about getting involved in local service institutions. I'd be interested in doing a city council or grand jury or something like that, which contributes to the community, cause you know, I want to believe in what I'm doing."

How did you get involved with teaching?

"I don't know that it was ever a long-term intention for me. I kind of started doing it just because that's what you do as a grad student. So, the first semester I was in grad school I was TA'ing for (teaching) a very large appreciation of music class, and you know I was doing all the mechanical TA work: attendance records and grades and blah blah blah.

One week before the class was over, the professor for the class says, "Okay. My Dad's dying. I need to leave town. You finish up the class." And I thought "Ooooookayyy." With that sort of bewildered look on my face. And it was a serious challenge. I had to write the final in the class, as well as do the last couple lectures and it was one of those things where I was just jamming as hard as I could.

Truthfully, I probably did a so-so job, but from that point forward I thought "Oh I could do this." And then I got more teaching assignments that were more independent teaching assignments, and I found I kind of liked it."



What was it you liked about it?

"I guess I'm not different than most teachers: being able to keep studying something you love, being able to try to really put some clarity to that. Every teacher says the same thing, "You really figure out what you know and what you don't know when you try to teach it." Trying to really bring out all the stories and lines of thought and all that junk about a topic. And it's just really great to work with young people, you know what I mean?

Simultaneously pushing on them to grow up and move on their own path, while at the same time, listening to

them and their concerns and their views on the world and so on. It's a nice interchange. And again, talk to anybody who teaches, young people keep you alive man. You just start sitting in a bubble with your old people friends talking about "Well I gotta take this medication and oh my god It's expensive." And it's just falling down a tube rather than gaining new insights."

Have you ever watched other people teach for that insight?

"Oh yeah, you kidding? You know how they say doctors make the worse patients? What's their attitude when being examined? Super critical. So of course, when I watch other teachers, I'm super critical about it. But also, if you don't try to be competitive, I mean that's how you learn stuff man.

I remember watching this guy when I did a semester at sea, god, 10 years ago, and they had a central class to the whole voyage, where somebody teaches sort of a global perspectives class, that involves history, economics, and past/present political/social issues. I have never seen such a good teacher. That guy made PowerPoints into movies. He knew so much about this stuff, and he could deliver such a clear narrative, with such a good presentational style, that you go “There it is! That’s what I should be doing.”

And then there’s other people. I went to a meeting earlier this week and they had some of the worst presenters I’ve seen. Somebody does a PowerPoint with slides full of text, and they skip over things, and you go “This isn’t working for me.” So, you look at good models and you look at bad models and sort of carve out your own style.”



Is that what you did to get a sense of how you would approach things when you first got into it?

“Sure. But I think I did the same thing that all young teachers do and you think it’s all about the content. And particularly the factual content and you spend all your time worrying about “Do I know all the facts? Have I got them all straight? Was that the right date? Let me look up that date.” And you do that. And then you get really into the mindset of “You must know this information. That is success in this class.” Over some course of time you realize that’s not what teaching’s about.”

So, what is it about?

“Getting people to come to a particular topic, whatever it is, and learning to run into a particular perspective and learn to ask their own questions so that they can create their own understandings. It’s teaching people how to teach themselves basically, at the college level that is. Gosh, I talk to people who teach grade school and think, “Ok they got a different job.”

But for college-age people, you’re at the perfect point in your life to become a self-educator, and man that’s powerful stuff. And that’s where the fun comes from, is watching students learn how to exercise that and you go *claps hands* “Yay! Good job man.” And that’s what it’s about.”

So, have you noticed a lot of growth coming out of your classes?

“Oh yeah, you kidding? It’s really fun to see someone as a fresh person and see them as a senior in a different context and go, “Oh my god, you’re a different being, you’re so mature, and grown up.”

What's it like teaching the same classes for many years?

"That's a really good question. Depends. Sometimes you hear that little voice in your head that goes, "Jeez, how many times have you done this man?" But I find every year, I just did it this morning, I'll revisit a class, get ready for class and go, "That's not good. Let's do something different there. And I'll revise things, invent new activities, so you tweak."

The first couple times you teach a class, it's a bit of a train wreck. You come up with an initial concept of what makes a good class, then you look back after the first semester and you go "Phew. I know that worked really well, but what the hell was I thinking there?" So, for most faculty, you talk to them, and about the third time you've taught a class you start to get in the groove with it. Then it starts to be fun and you iterate from there and it gets more fun. I actually don't get tired of it."

Have you ever majorly revamped the curriculum for any of your classes?

"Yeah, but then it's just the same cycle starting over, and you think, "Ehh, this is like 15% okay, and you start over."



I've noticed when you're teaching, and talking to you now, you make a lot of gestures, there's always energy in your hands. Was that something you picked up from watching others like we discussed earlier, or is it more naturally you?

"Yes, definitely the latter. Getting back to teaching elements, everybody's a different person: Introversion, extroversion, body language, verbal style, all kinda that junk. For me, the absolute best teachers are the people who don't put on a whole different character to be a teacher and then take it off when they walk out of the room. Instead they learn to integrate who they actually are with their teaching methodology. They're just people, so they don't feel like phony bolognas."

I like to figure out what works and what doesn't work out of a person. So if there's

stuff that might not work, as a person, you try to tell that one to sit in the office as you go to class. But why not be you? And again, it's hooked to that idea that it's not all about the information, but about what understandings/ communication skills can you bring that can help people develop their understanding. Anything that works for engagement, by me, is fair game.

In other words, you can yell, or be quiet, you can be an introvert, you can use humor, whatever works for engagement, cause to me that's the bottom line. You only have success when I get a student to come to the topic and engage themselves with it. So, whatever it takes man."

So, would you prefer a class of extroverts?

"Oh yeah man! But let's put that into two stereotypes of students: one is a mouth-off, your internal voices say, "God, would you shut up." But I would much rather have that student than the blackhole, who just sits in class entirely disconnected. So yes, I would.

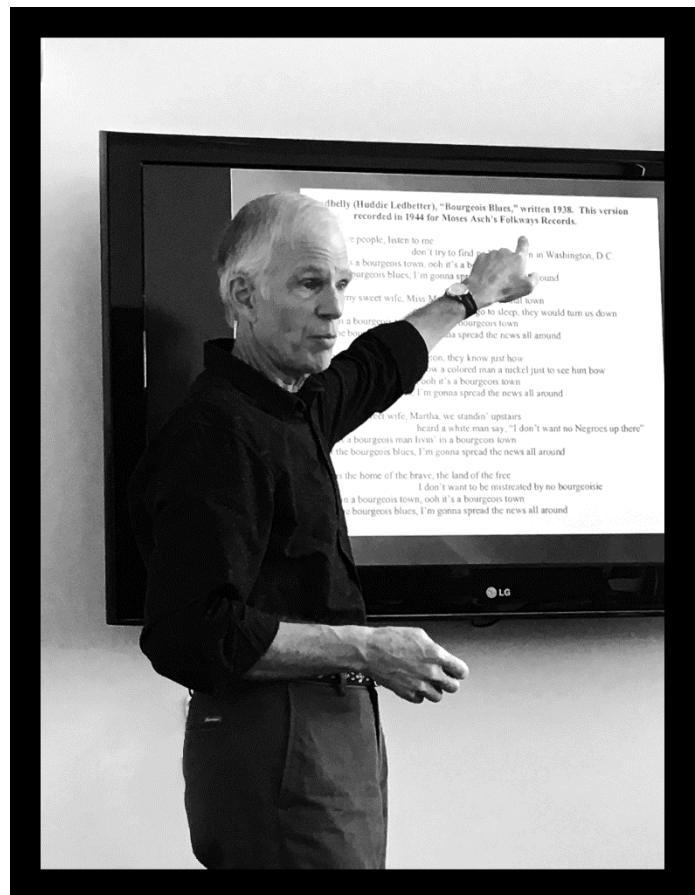
But you also can't ask students to not be who they are, you now what I'm saying? But yeah, if you asked me what would be the ideal class, it would be boisterous people who love engaging with each other as well as the topic, who love forming a team, where they trust and know each other, and they're all interested, with a little bit of healthy competition in there, but they still work together."

Does that mean you prefer smaller classes?

"Oh no question. If you say, "What makes a good educational experience?"

Mechanically, it's a numbers game. Small classes are easier to have a good experience in, they just are. Conversely, it can be a real challenge to have a good educational experience in a couple-hundred-person lecture. That guy I mentioned that semester at sea, he knew how to do it. And I've watched other people who're really theatrical, energetic, who know how to do it. But it's work. You really gotta just march in there and command that room like an opera singer man.

And you know, from a student's perspective, the easiest thing to do in the big class to make it effective: sit in the front. It's funny, when I used to teach the big humanities 1010/1020 class, on the days I wasn't teaching, I would try out different places in the room to sit, and you sit in the back and you just think "God this is hard to stay engaged man." This girl's talking, this guy's sleeping, this one's checking his snapchat or whatever; there's this little person down there, lecturing or whatever. Where, if you sit in the front there's actually something going on.



I only know about two people on this campus who prefer the larger classes. And that's because, their teaching style and personal style, interpersonal communication makes them uncomfortable. They'd much rather be a performer."

That makes sense. So then, do you think anyone can teach?

"No. If I ask you, what're the skillsets and personality traits that make a person a good teacher? I'd say clarity, communication skills are part of the skillset. Introverted people have a hard time being a teacher, and that's a personality thing. People who're sort of anal and say, "No there is one right answer, and *my* answer is the right answer." That's a hard one in a teacher. So no, in the same way there's certain jobs not everyone can handle, like how not everyone could be an engineer."

What're your opinions on grades?

"Grades are like money to me, and you've got to keep track of them, and earn them, but if you put all your attention there that's all you get, you know what I'm saying? Just getting a 4.0 for the sake of a 4.0 is like saying I make a million dollars a year, are you happier? Does that make a better life? But, again, it's not always easy. In the medical path, from what I understand, you really need to have some money, in grades, to be able to get into medical school. So, if that's your chosen field, then you need to pay attention to that, you also have to decide whether that's important to you."



You do seem to be more of an involved grader, in terms of how much you're willing to push people on their grades, that turning in an assignment doesn't necessarily mean its complete.

"Oh yeah. In terms of giving feedback, don't do this and try this and so on. Oh yeah, I push on people. But in terms of the letter grade, the salary so to speak, my wife always tells me I'm too soft. But to me that fits the philosophy of I'm interested in your personal growth. You do that through efforts feedback, efforts feedback,

not, “Hey, here’s an A.” If you just pay somebody at the end of the day and you don’t ask, “Did they do good work?”, then it’s all about the grades and that’s that.”

Do you think the education system does enough to encourage that kind of success, beyond grades, and that kind of success?

“Simple answer no. We get about halfway there. It goes back to other things like class size and so on. The general answer is we could always do better. Cause I think we do get overconcerned with factual information, with job outcomes from a degree. Those things get in the way of personal development and personal happiness and that kinda stuff.

But it’s not easy. For your generation, it’s a harder deal man. That polarization of the economy has scared the pants off you guys in terms of job security. And so, it’s hard to tell a young person your age, “Hey man, personal growth, that’s what college is about. Find your bliss and pursue it.” And you go, “Well, I could starve to death or I could really not be able to pay the bills.” And you have to admit, anybody has to admit, yup that’s a real possibility these days and I’m sorry that it’s been laid on you but that’s true. So, your generation has to see if they can find that balance.”