

In Memoriam: Dr. Trevor Melia (Richard E. Vatz)

Richard E. Vatz (submitter), rvatz@towson.edu

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Trevor Melia: The Finest Professor and Mentor I have known

Trevor Melia, University of Pittsburgh, was simply the finest professor and mentor I have known in my lengthy career. His knowledge and writing were impressive, but I shall leave it to more scholarly admirers to reflect on them.

Personally, I learned more from him regarding substance and character than all of my other undergraduate and graduate professors combined, if you subtract from the group the wonderful professor and teacher, Robert P. Newman, also from Pitt.

One of Trevor's key qualities, perhaps the key quality, was that he was unthreatened by disagreement. He was on the left, and I was on the right, but he always found our differences of perspective interesting, and he loved to debate with me. We had endless dialogues about points of political dispute, but they were always meetings of the minds.

His classes were characterized by his unthreatened nature, with help and evaluations unaffected by student disagreement. His sense of humor, always understated and as subtle and clever and brilliant as his lectures, always made the class time pass in a wink.

When I wrote the article "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation" as a graduate student, Trevor celebrated the publication, and we discussed how his influence and teachings had informed and motivated me to write the position I wrote.

My fellow graduate students and I were in consistent discussions at Pitt about the strengths and weaknesses of our professors. I heard profound disagreements in their evaluations, but literally all of them cited Trevor as the individual who helped them grow in the field and treated them fairly. This was a period in which unfair treatment of students by professors went unpunished, even undiscouraged. The only motivation to be a principled professor was its intrinsic value. And Trevor was also the most principled professor I have known.

Pitt hired a young professor at one point, brilliant but abrasive, but Trevor fearlessly became his closest friend in the department. That friendship saved the professor for a long time, and Trevor never thought twice about it.

Trevor was the closest professor to me, but I was not the closest student to him. His knowledge, decency and availability attracted the very best and second best of students and colleagues, and the sociology around him, with few exceptions, represented the best, brightest and highest integrity members of the field.

He was always available to help me throughout my career.

Brilliant, unthreatened and fair - a very rare combination of qualities, and Trevor Melia was the exemplar of those attributes.
