

# Oliver Gibson “Vignettes”

## *Arriving the Year before UB Went State*

I grew up in Annapolis Valley, in Nova Scotia. That's just six miles outside of Annapolis Royal, which was first settled by the French in 1604, well before Plymouth Rock. I recall geography lessons telling about the Niagara Peninsula. It was a fruit-growing area. Annapolis Valley was a fruit-growing area also. I recall as a very young person thinking that the Niagara area must be interesting.

As a young person, I would go to the local courthouse and sit in the back, and I listened to the judges and to the lawyers arguing their cases. I was rather interested in that. But I never seriously thought about going into law. I spent a lot of time talking with teachers and thinking about what it would be like to be a teacher. That was the only thing that had any economic feasibility.

The superintendent of schools for the province of Nova Scotia said, “Anybody who is going to be certified to be an administrator in Nova Scotia has to take his education outside the province.” I took a look at Columbia, Toronto University, and Harvard. I settled on Harvard. They seemed to have more a sense of what they were up to. I didn't realize at that time that the School of Education at Harvard was trying to get an image of being something more than backyard Boston, as an institution. They wanted to get international visibility.

I finished my master's degree and the doctorate, and then I stayed on at Harvard and taught for six or seven years in the Education Administration department.

My mentor heard that they were talking about making UB a graduate center in the New York State system. He alerted me to it. I wound up here, arriving the year before UB went state.

At that time, the institution here had what people refer to as the “Avis Complex.” Avis is supposedly second-class. If you called someone on the phone, the secretary would answer, and you'd say, “This is . . .” The secretary would say, “And do I say ‘Dr.’ or ‘Mr.’?” It was next door to criminal to fail to mention a person's doctorate.

## *How to Ask a Question*

I had my first interview with a doctoral candidate when I was working with Harvard's Education Administration program in about 1955. There was a professor that I knew pretty well on the committee with me; he and I talked a good deal. Not wanting to be unduly officious, I didn't want to ask an early question, but I didn't want to sit there for the whole two hours without asking any questions. So after a while, I asked a question of his student.

Afterwards we sauntered back across the yard to the building where we stayed, Spaulding House. He said, “Ollie, you never ask a question that implies the answer.” So I guess the question that I had asked was one that implied an answer.

I went to work to teach myself how to ask a question that a person couldn't figure out the answer to, just from the question. I got that skill developed fairly well . . . I thought.

I arrived at UB when it was still a private institution. A memorable person here was Adele Land, who was cheerful and very gracious. She was the memory of the institution.

At that time, when doctoral students at the School of Education came up for a dissertation quiz, they met with the whole faculty.

It was still customary to smoke inside. Adele used to sit there smoking a cigarette. After I'd asked a question, there would be utter silence.

Adele would take a drag on her cigarette and say, “Well, I think Ollie means so-and-so-on.” Then she would clarify it so that the student would get some clue about how to answer.

## *The Uncertain Profession*

I have a book called *The Uncertain Profession*. The title refers to the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, but it could very well be the school here at UB. In the book is L.O. Cummings, who was the first dean of UB's Graduate School of Education and started the first program in school administration here.

As an institutional observation, I would say that the School of Education has had a great, great difficulty figuring out what it's up to. That continues to be the case.

From time to time, people undertake the process of clarifying the objectives of the school. That's part of a broader divide in the field of education. There are two sides to it.

One side is that a person should be subjected to stimuli from a number of other people to learn facts, such as what you need to know about math, or what you need to know about history. The State of New York goes through spasms of concern that teachers won't know enough to apply the stimuli to kids.

I have yet to find a student who later on talks about his professor because of what he knew. Practically always, the memorable teacher is memorable not intellectually so much as emotionally. Students feel it's a person who has confidence in them and arouses confidence in themselves.

That, I think, is what education needs to get a grasp of: the fact that people aren't all brain.

During my undergraduate study at Mount Allison in New Brunswick, Canada, I ran across someone who was memorable for his approach to teaching. He was Professor Gustav Heubner, who had been a student of Husserl (noted for starting the school of phenomenology) at the University of Berlin. He had also been a student of Henri Bergsson.

Professor Heubner had a very direct and unpretentious approach to life. I guess he simply assumed that human beings have an awareness that they can do something with. I still recall with great clarity the sessions that he led. He had – at least for me – a kind of magnetism that is unusual.

## *The Diamond Pattern*

After coming to UB in the '60s, I served for the better part of the decade, more than five years, on the Executive Committee of the Graduate School. That was a time when various departments that had gone state had more money, and they could hire professors. The School of Education was doing the same thing.

The important degree at UB had been, up until that time, a master's degree. These departments which were expanding their interests were now interested in making the primary degree a Ph.D. They had to clear this through the executive committee of the graduate school. As a result, we sat there for years, reviewing programs. My chore was to ask administrator-like questions such as Albany might ask.

If, for example, the history department had made a proposal for a degree, it was presumed that people from physics wouldn't have any ability to judge a history proposal. I would say that what went on during the '60s and into the start of the '70s was that mysteries of a given specialization were presumed to be mastered only by those people in that specialization. If a person did not agree with that, they would be undercutting their friends.

There was a kind of noblesse oblige, a tacit process by which committee members said, "We can't judge that. Obviously, they can. They must be doing the right thing." Proposals went through there year after year, new programs obtaining state money to hire faculty.

The School of Education expanded during that period of time. They probably tripled their faculty, something like that. Then came the presumed hard times of the late '70s through the '80s.

I refer to this pattern as "the diamond." From the early '60s, the number of faculty increased. Then in the late '70s and '80s, they went back down. Today, the School of Education is pretty much back down to where it was when it went state.

## “I’m the Bishop”

When I taught for UB’s Graduate School of Education, I was in Educational Administration, teaching students how to run schools. I felt that my purpose was to awaken minds to something different from what they were doing.

I thought the most mind-awakening thing I did was to teach a course on leadership. Students read such things as the seventh book of Plato’s *Republic*, where he was mulling over what kind of a curriculum he wanted to have for these leaders. We also read Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and Tolstoy’s epilogue to *War and Peace*.

Then, after a time, I taught another book, Jean Genet’s *The Balcony*. The Balcony was a house of prostitution. The men came not for the usual services, but to have a woman help them carry out their fantasy. The first one showed up, and he was a plumber or something like that. He wanted to imagine himself a bishop. He put on his tall miter on and coat and got up on a little dais, and he felt bigger than life.

On a couple of occasions, I was asked, “Whaddya got that dirty book for?” The last year before I retired, I thought maybe I was going to have my first student grievance. A student had a teenage son who saw the book on her coffee table and asked her what she was reading that for. She was a bit upset about that.

But one day, she was getting ready for an interview with a school in a nearby district. She wanted to be an administrator. She was getting herself dressed up for the interview and looked in the mirror, when she said, “My goodness, I’m the bishop.” She made the connection.

It was quite a chore for her to see that connection. I guess we tend not to think that we’re supposed to make that kind of connection to anything personal. We think we need to know about things like quadratic equations and Roman antiquities. I prefer the long-standing tradition that says that education can be an awakening process.

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