Eudora Welty, who died last July, was one of the South’s most prominent writers. In her autobiography, entitled One Writer’s Beginning, she described how her mother at a very young age put up her hair and took on the job of teaching in a one-room mountain school with pupils of all ages. On her first day of school, some of the fathers came along to see how she would manage the older students, some of whom were both older and bigger than she was.

She began by telling her pupils that she intended to whip them if they became unwieldy and refused to learn. Then she welcomed the fathers, invited them to stay, and announced that she was perfectly capable of whipping them, too. Welty reports that “having thus been tried out, she was a great success with them after that.”

Things have changed somewhat over the past century since Eudora Welty’s mother entered the classroom. The measure of successful teaching is no longer grounded in the ability to whip students who are bigger than you are when they become unwieldy and refuse to learn. And in most respects, that’s a good thing.

But it does leave young teachers with a lot more ambiguity about how to establish a foundation for engaging their students in the classroom. Teaching can be an intimidating thing. You have to overcome fears of looking foolish, of failing, of facing conflict. This uncertainty can make young faculty teach defensively, focused on their own self-esteem rather than on their students. It is easy to get caught up in trying to command the respect of our students by impressing them with our own knowledge and intelligence, rather than concentrating on helping them to learn. And it’s tempting to think that it would probably be much simpler if we could still announce our resolve to smack them around a little if they don’t pay attention.

Good teaching requires courage and self-confidence. It means taking risks, overcoming fears, and creating a partnership with your students in which both you and they share in the responsibilities of learning together. Fortunately, here at Georgia Tech we have Donna Llewellyn and the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning to help graduate students and young faculty step into the classroom with confidence, and to give senior faculty the opportunity to refresh their teaching techniques.

CETL’s goal is to help you become a more critically reflective teacher, and a more creative and daring one. And I want to thank Donna and her staff for the important contribution they make to teaching at Georgia Tech.
The nation’s top award for innovative teaching in higher education is the Hesburgh Award. And when Georgia Tech won it a few years ago, primarily because of CETL’s programs, some people are surprised that we pay so much attention to teaching. Research universities are known for emphasizing research over teaching.

Besides, our students are so very bright. Surely, the logic goes, they are capable of muddling through to success on their own. But in reality, highly intelligent students are just as much in need of exciting teaching as anyone. Textbooks provide important information, and have an accuracy and reliability about them that is useful and needed. But we are not serving our students well if we reduce learning to a black-and-white series of facts and formulae.

What good teaching offers even the most intelligent student is critical ballast – guidance about the range of what they should know and understand, and about what is more important or less important within that range; and the opportunity to integrate the knowledge they are acquiring and put it to work in creative and practical ways.

Our students are not here to be taught in the same sense as younger pupils, but to learn, to discover, and to broaden their intellectual horizons. These are pretty much the same goals that our faculty have in their own academic endeavors – after all, research is a learning process, a process of discovery. Research and teaching are not mutually exclusive, but rather closely related. They can and ought to enrich each other.

The point of Georgia Tech’s existence is the discovery and application of knowledge. We are a community of learners. Whether we are searching for new knowledge that can improve lives, or preparing for a career in business and industry, or working to help Georgia Tech define technological university of the 21st century, everyone on our campus – students, faculty and staff – should be a learner somewhere on the spectrum. In that context, the goal of CETL is to help create optimal learning experiences.

Poet Robert Frost once said, “I teach in order to learn.” And I know from personal experience that teaching is a tremendous learning opportunity. Teaching reacquaints you with the subject matter of your discipline in a new way. It is a learning experience to reexamine and organize the fundamentals on which you base your own work in order to articulate them clearly and help others understand them. It is a learning experience to think about how your discipline serves the larger world and what your students should know from it in order to serve society better.

But teaching your first class is also something like going to your first dance. When you’re getting ready for it, your focus is on the subject matter – on making sure you know the dance steps. But once you actually get there, a lot of what you learn has nothing to do with the dance steps. In addition to redefining my view of my own discipline, teaching also taught me extremely valuable lessons in communication, in
human relationships with both students and administrators, and in motivation, both of
myself and my students.

In research, we experiment, we learn, we share the results with our colleagues, and we
evaluate what works and what doesn’t. We have structures to help us do that, and it is
considered a valuable part of the process of discovery. But in teaching, we are mute. We
spend little time engaged in exploration and experimentation. At many universities, the
vehicles for evaluating the results of any experimentation in teaching tend to be
connected to performance reviews, so faculty try to avoid the whole process at all costs.

But teaching, like research, is an important and complex knowledge-based activity, and
we need to recognize what Lee Shulman of the Carnegie Foundation for the
Advancement of Teaching calls “the scholarship of teaching” – and approach teaching
as a scholarly activity just as we do research.

That is what CETL does at Georgia Tech. As Teaching Fellows, you are engaged in “the
scholarship of teaching.” You are creating and experimenting with new methods and
technology; you are uncovering new knowledge; you are examining what works and
what doesn’t; and you are sharing the results with your colleagues. That is an extremely
valuable pursuit that will serve you personally, and even as it improves our climate for
learning here at Georgia Tech.

Today we are celebrating teaching and recognizing the efforts of three groups of
Teaching Fellows. Some of you have already been engaged in the “scholarship of
teaching” over the course of the current academic year, and we are surrounded by the
evidence of what you have learned. Others will begin as Fellows in fall semester, and
you are now getting a taste of the excitement that awaits you.

I especially want to welcome the very first group of STEP Fellows. STEP stands for
“Student and Teacher Enhancement Partnership.” This program, which is funded by
the National Science Foundation, places graduate students from Georgia Tech in high
school college-prep classes in math and science. It gives graduate students who are
interested in teaching an opportunity to do a “test drive,” and it enriches the learning
experience that Atlanta area high schools provide to students who are preparing for
college.

In some ways, high school is a difficult age to teach, because teenagers are noted for
questioning authority, if not rebelling against it outright. But they are also intensely
curious about the world out there, and if you can create a spark that touches off that
curiosity, then teaching high school can be an immensely rewarding experience. The
STEP program involves graduate students in helping high schools touch off that spark
by providing students with increased opportunity for inquiry-based learning.
I always look forward to these CETL luncheons to celebrate teaching, because they provide me with an opportunity to do a little inquiry-based learning about the “scholarship of teaching.” And I’d like to hear from you about the most significant thing you learned from your experience, whether you are a STEP Fellow spending this year at a high school, a Teaching Fellow in the early years of your career, or a Hesburgh Fellow who has been recharging your batteries and refreshing your teaching techniques.