The effects of Bernie-isms and Bernie-cises on various populations of graduate students and faculty

Sheri Sheppard

With Contributions from
Larry (Bear) Carlson, Darek Ceglarek, Mark Cutkosky, Krista Donaldson, Chris Effiong, Bill Knowlton, Alexander Mamishev, Amy Moll, Christine PingGe, Ruth Richardson, Jenn Rossmann, Ben Schafer

In Celebration
Over the last 35 years Professor Bernie Roth has offered events for hundreds of faculty, staff, students and engineers to make them aware of their untapped potential for creativity in their work and their lives, and to assist them in confronting barriers to successful teaching, personal and professional growth. These events have included seminars, workshops and courses. This paper summarizes some of these events. It then illustrates, in the words of participants, the impact of the events and Bernie on their lives. These participants, his students, are part of Bernie’s life’s work.

This paper is offered in celebration of Bernie Roth’s seventieth birthday. I write it with love, respect and gratitude, as Bernie’s colleague, co-teacher, student and friend. If you, the reader, have been a student of Bernie’s, I hope this paper sparks a fond memory of a gift from Bernie. If you have not been a student of Bernie’s, I let you know that you are about to read about a man whose work is founded on acts of kindness.

A Bit of His-Story
Bernie has organized and taught numerous courses and workshops focused on assisting participants in expanding their creativity and problem solving skills. The first of these was when Bernie, along with Doug Wilde (another professor at Stanford), created an

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1 Other titles suggested by contributors include “A different kind of education,” “Not to Hug the Turd and other things learned from Bernie,” “Bernie Has Touched Many People,” and “Bernie Rocks.”
undergraduate course in 1968 called *Sensory Awareness*. This 2-unit course was held in Stern Hall at Burbank (now called Casa Zapata), where Doug and his wife Jane were faculty residents. *Sensory Awareness* was replaced by a second 2-unit course taught by Bernie and Doug in 1969 called *People Dynamics Lab* and was taught 29 times between 1969 and 1980.

Through *Sensory Awareness* and *People Dynamics Lab*, Bernie and Doug developed and “used on students” many of the ideas, techniques and methods that Bernie later incorporated into another course called *The Individual and Society*. When first introduced in 1970, the 3-unit course was numbered ME221/E203. In 1978 the number changed to ME215 and the name was changed to *The Designer in Society*. Bernie recalls, “The name change from *The Individual and Technology* to *The Designer in Society* was motivated by two things that I remember. I thought it would be nicer to have more Product Design masters students in the class, and people told me the name was not really representative of the class. The new name is not any more representative, and somehow students have stopped telling me it is not representative.”

In 2003 the course number changed to ME315. Between 1970 and 2003, *The Designer in Society* was offered 30 times to over 700 students. The 2002/03 Stanford Bulletin describes ME315 as: “Open to all graduate students. Participants’ career objectives and psychological orientation are compared with existing social values and conditions. Emphasis on assisting individuals in assessing their roles in society. Readings on political, social, and humanistic thought related to technology and design. Experiential, in class, exercises, and a term project. Attendance mandatory at all class sessions.”

In 1989, building on the ideas in *The Designer in Society*, Bernie partnered with Doug Wilde and Rolf Faste (another Stanford professor) to offer a long running series of summer workshops called *Creativity Workshops*. These two-week long summer workshops brought together over 200 professors from leading universities to reflect on their academic careers with the intention to be more creative, and gain new insights into alternative course design and teaching techniques. The leaders believed that participants should view “professoring” as a dynamics problem solving activity. Shorter versions of the Creativity Workshop were offered to engineers around the country.

Bernie also participated as a guest speaker and co-organizer of the *New Century Scholars workshop* (NCS) from 1999-2002. NCS was designed to help new engineering faculty from around the country understand learning and teaching practices which support effective learning for all students. Participants worked actively to redesign courses and instructional strategies, taking into consideration new information and research concerning teaching, learning styles, time and stress management, developing a career strategy, and balance in personal and professional lives. Bernie led sessions on *Small Groups and BIG Ideas*, and *Finite Difference and Integration*. 
New Century Scholars 2002
Since the spring of 2002, Bernie and I have co-taught a masters- and Ph.D-level seminar (Designing the Engineer) driven by student interests, where topics may include time management, career choices, diversity, professional development and personal values. This seminar borrows heavily from the methods and techniques in ME315.

In late 2002 I e-mailed participants of some of the events listed above and asked them to write a few lines or draw a picture on their interactions with Bernie in a workshop, seminar or class. I suggested that their contribution might look at:

- Bernie-isms
- A “Bernie moment”
- A memorable episode in a workshop or class
- Bernie’s influence on your point of view
- or anything else you would like to share.

In return for their contributions, I promised I would organize whatever they sent. Following are their contributions.

On Bernie’s Intentions
The workshops and courses Bernie offers are not focused on having his students develop an understanding of a “theory of life.” His intent is far less complicated and far more profound. He quite simply wants us to be happy and is there to point to basic behaviors that may get in the way of this happiness. Amy and Bill (NCS 2002) reflect:

The U.S. society, in general, defines “success” in terms of quantities: amount of money earned, number of raises, number of promotions, power, etc. Academia also defines success in terms of numbers, number of publications, number of awards, amount of research funding, etc. In this society, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the push for quantity and end up with a sense that you do not have enough: time, money, publication, recognition, etc.

Now imagine, into this crazed, frenetic day to day existence...walks Bernie. It would be easy enough to ignore him: “oh, he’s just a crazy old professor, a little off his rocker, mad scientist type.”

Yet, if you are able to halt, for a moment, in your frenetic day-to-day existence, and just listen, just hear even a portion of what he is trying to tell you. If you allow his ideas to even momentarily register, you will be forced to STOP and if nothing else, at least argue with him. But more likely, you will find yourself reflecting on your own values and your own responsibility in structuring your life to match those values. You will have to admit that you have control over your life and responsibility in sticking to your values. (Amy and Bill)

Other former students add

One of your [Bernie’s] wonderful skills is the ability to help us see things as they are, rather than as we
perceive (or mis-perceive) them. (Bear Creativity Workshops 1990, 1999)

Bernie is a "master of surprise" in stripping down any unnecessary and unimportant points/thoughts--sort of a perfect way of removing, what I might call "mental bureaucracy" from one's ways of reasoning and analyzing an issue. (Darek NCS 2002)

Ruth (NCS 2002) comments that Bernie wants us to consider how to

Live a quality life.  
Derive "quality" from first principles.  
Honestly define your own first principles.

Jenn (NCS 2002) offers that

It would be easy, but wrong, to describe Bernie as persuasive. Bernie wants you to do that thing you most want to do, the thing you've decided is too impractical, inconvenient, selfish, or difficult to pursue. Maybe it's getting married before you finish your dissertation, maybe it's having kids before you get tenure, maybe it's taking that class in oil painting when you feel like you ought to be writing that third NIH proposal. And doesn't want to talk you into it, to be your buddy who keeps you in tequila shots until you've amassed enough liquid courage to take that forbidding first step. Bernie manages to instill this courage in you by getting you to think about why it is you want this thing, and what obstacles are in your way, and who put them there; ultimately, he helps you to gain some perspective on the whole situation.

On Bernie's Methods
The methods and techniques that Bernie uses in his teaching include exercises, discussions, stories, memorable phrases, and using the moment. Examples of exercises include

- having paired students query one another not 5 or 10 times, but 60 to 80 times with the question “who are you?” (it is amazing that after offering the pat answers of “teacher,” “student,” “daughter,” “husband,” one starts to play with more basic and grand ideas of “liar,” “explorer,” “scared person,” and “leader of my world.”)

- having students visualize in detail themselves as a rose bush, then share with the class their rose story in first person,

- challenging me to try to move an eraser across the desk. No problem, I thought, so I easily slid it. “No,” you insisted, “you're moving it. Just try to move it instead.” It took me several moments of frustration before I realized what you were trying to teach me: there is no “try” – only “do” or “not do.” (Bear)

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A strong warning that Bernie gives regarding all of these methods and techniques is “use them to fix yourself. Don’t use them to fix others. You signed up for this course. Your friends and family didn’t.”
These exercises are commonly followed by **discussion** to see what insights or questions they may have sparked. Often as part of the discussion, **Bernie tells a story**. For example, after an exercise focused on the use of projection, one student says, “Bernie, I just don’t understand.” Bernie responds with a story about a friend who asks him to explain a *New Yorker* cartoon to her. After hearing Bernie’s description the friend says “I understand.” Bernie goes on, “she understood it. In contrast, if she had “gotten it” she would have opened up the magazine and burst out laughing. That is the difference between understanding it and getting it. I want you to get it.”

**Chris** (NCS 2002) describes another story told by Bernie as part of a session entitled *Finite Difference and Integration*.

Now, let me tell you a story about a drunken man and the lampposts,” said Bernie. The story ended and we did not get the point. Bernie started yet another story. Out of anxiety, one of us asked: what has this got do with “finite difference and integration”? Bernie chuckled, and said, “… it has to do with your ability to integrate the finite aspects of your career into your life....” It was then clear, that, the topic of our discussion was “career and life”. In essence, Bernie’s message was that, we do the best that we can at all times and free our mind from catastrophic expectations. It is remarkable how Professor Bernie Roth can use simple anecdotes to impart knowledge and share his wisdom.

Bernie’s methods include **memorable phrases**, which might better be called ”Bernie-isms”. These Bernie-isms have a way of staying with you, long after the workshop or course. **Ben** (NCS 2002) offers examples of Bernie-isms (*along with his own comments*):

"They dance around they are happy, they wear pink” (In reference to finding great happiness, presumably as a Hari Krishna, which usually wears orange - the color mis-reference just makes it that much better a quote.)

"You are still hugging that turd.” (We all are.)

"I am giving you a gift." (Yes you are Bernie. Yes you are.)

"Close your eyes. Imagine the answer. Any questions?” (Bernie’s answer to your problem.)

"You don't want to win a Nobel Prize if it f***s you up and makes you an a** hole.. There are several Nobel Prize winners I know intimately – they are stupid." (Makes me glad they don't give Nobel prizes for engineering. Could you say the same thing about an NIH/NSF grant?... hmm.)

"I don't sit at home and masturbate about my papers." (Why not Bernie? Why not?)

"The party line is live your values and all that.” (nuf said.)
"Babies grow up to be people. Then you have s***."  
(Life.)

Bernie’s teaching technique also includes using whatever a moment might bring. Bear recalls

After the opening dinner of the first course I attended at Stanford, a subset of us were lingering on after the meal, finishing the wine and getting to know each other. A cleaning woman came in and turned up the lights. “Is she trying to tell us something?” I inquired. “No,” you replied calmly, “she’s just doing her job.” She finished her duties, and as she left, turned the lights back down again. “Oh,” exclaimed another student, “is she trying to tell us something?” “No,” you replied, “she’s just doing her job!”

Jenn adds that

This would never work if Bernie stood at a chalkboard and wrote "Today's lesson: gaining perspective. #1, why do you want this; #2, what's stopping you.” But gaining perspective is the inescapable outcome of participating in any discussion with Bernie. Or of performing his exercises: Write down what you want; next, write down what it will do for you if you achieve that goal; repeat until you have arrived at a less material, more internal goal that is simultaneously more general and more specific than where you started. Bernie tells you that you may feel your goals are in conflict, but that you should not allow them to negate each other. Not, "I'm married, but I have a girlfriend," says Bernie facetiously (?), but "I'm married, AND I have a girlfriend." More than likely, Bernie tells you, you've been so sure your goal is out of reach, for so long, that you've fallen a little in love with this burdensome problem you've got. You are, in fact, "hugging the turd."

Bernie Stays with You

The phrases, stories and exercises that make up the courses and workshops that Bernie leads have a way of popping up in the subsequent months and years.

Later, after your encounter with Bernie, when life is again frenetic and seemingly out of control, Bernie will cause you to stop and think. It’s almost like the Jedi Knights that appear as shimmering mirages (Bernie is Yoda?) to Luke Skywalker in his difficult moments. A shimmering image of Bernie appears to you and out of his mouth slips a Bernie-ism:

> "It's all bullshit"
> "who are you?"
> "but?"

The statements Bernie makes, the exercises he leads, may at first seem glib or silly or just plain frustrating. But the experience of “being with Bernie” and the core of the gifts Bernie gives you is that he does not let you “off the hook.” He is persistent and patient and committed to getting you to see, feel, acknowledge, and know: you are responsible for your life, you are in control of your life, you have only yourself to hold
accountable. If you allow Bernie to reach you, it will change your life. (Amy and Bill)

Bernie’s methods challenge us to look at the problems in our own lives.

As a component of the intense week of the New Century Scholars workshop, Bernie’s exercises were invaluable. I suspect that most of us had a “turd” we were clutching tightly to our chests: the impossibility of balancing career and family; the intractability of the two-body problem; the difficulty of showing a roomful of sleep-deprived, entirely ungrateful undergraduates the beauty of PDEs; the insurmountable odds of approval by NIH/NSF powers. The bulk of the workshop, of course, provided us with concrete strategies for attacking these problems, and countless valuable resources. But only Bernie made us think deeply about the nature of these problems, put them in more realistic perspective, and begin to let go. (Jenn)

The lessons and insights from the workshops influence our work. Alex (NCS 2002) offers:

Workshop participants often attack Bernie's philosophy from different angles. Many questions represent a directed effort to counterexample and prove him wrong, just for the sake of the argument. I often encounter the same situation in my classroom. Bernie once commented: “No matter what question you throw at me, I'll handle it.” So, I learned to cherish the moment and to put my effort into handling the question right there and then. It does not exclude the consequent subconscious processing and follow up, but it puts an emphasis on the ability to be in control of your lecture, email exchange, phone conversation, etc at the moment when it takes place.”

Christine (NCS 2002) adds that

[She met Bernie] at a critical point of my life and career. I was a first-year assistant professor in a new town, not particular in favor of colored people. On the other hand, I myself was confused about what I wanted and what I needed. As a result of all these, I felt extremely insure and tried to bury myself with endless "to-dos". Coming to the 2002 NCS workshop rescued me from sinking further, and more importantly, lifted me up a bit. In particular, Bernie's everyday, almost "grueling", mind-stretching exercise helped me to put all the things in perspective. I found my head became clearer and heart lighter. I actually started to appreciate my new life and decided not to be all buried by my work. So Far, I have successfully applied Bernie's techniques in handling unpleasant situations in buying my home. Bernie has become a inseparable part of my growing up process in America and his influence will always shed lights at the darkest moments of my life.

And Mark (Creativity Workshop 1998) reflects:

After participating in a summer workshop by Bernie Roth and Rolf Faste it became clear to me that students in our ME210/310 graduate design sequence, Team-Based Design Development with Corporate Partners, desperately needed a shot of Bernie Roth Philosophy. So for the past several years, I've asked Bernie to make
a guest appearance in ME210/310. The perfect time for Bernie to do his thing is late November, when teams are coming to grips with their corporate design projects and starting to realize the difficulties they’re facing. It’s an anxious time for many teams and a time during which they start to learn that they need to take charge — for their own satisfaction and for the sake of the project. I’ve entitled Bernie’s talk “You’re the Boss.” He engages the class with some simple exercises about discovering one’s true goals and about seeing excuses for what they are. And he gets them to appreciate the difference between “trying” and “doing.”

For many people, these are not revolutionary ideas but Bernie delivers them with such conviction, wit and warmth that you soon see the “aha” lightbulbs turning on all over the classroom. And every year, though I’ve heard the material many times, I do the exercises too and I get my own aha. For these are songs that get better every time you practice them:

What are your main goals at this time?
What will it do for you if you achieve them?
Supposing there was no way you could achieve them, what then?
And what, or who, is really preventing you from achieving them?
Yeah, that’s right... You’re the Boss!”

The “You’re the Boss!” idea has even inspired Mark to write a poem that he uses in ME210/310:

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You’re the Boss!
The days are growing short and gray.
The project isn’t what you’d thought.
The teaching team wants C.F.P’s, but your sponsor has his own ideas... (some are reasonable, some are not).
Too little time, too many questions, too many constraints.
You’re at a loss...
But hey, it’s O.K. because

- -- 
- *Critical Function Prototypes

And Krista (ME215, 1997) offers a visual comment on her experiences with Bernie.
I took MEC15 Winter Quarter in 1997. The class was over-subscribed and I was booted out uncannily the first day. I wrote a poem. He, of course, didn’t tell me that. It is easily the best class I’ve ever taken. I can still remember most of my chores, projects, and myself’s contribution to me.

Bernie, let me back in—because someone had dropped not because of my poem. He, of course, didn’t tell me that. It is easily the best class I’ve ever taken. I can still remember most of my chores, projects, and my own self’s contribution to me.

This is not an easy way down.
Concluding with Her-Story

I met Bernie in the spring of 1983. I was a graduate student at the time at the University of Michigan, out vacationing in California. I had arranged through my advisor to meet with faculty at Stanford. Bernie was among the faculty I met. I was immediately impressed with Stanford—its Mediterranean architecture, palms trees and elevators with glass ceilings so that you could see how they work. Bernie was another matter. While he was cordial enough, my initial impression was that he was stand-off-ish. Boy, was that first impression ever wrong.

Fast forward now to the summer of 1998. I have been one of Bernie’s colleagues at Stanford since 1986 and am asked by Bernie, Rolf and Doug to participate in one of the Creativity Workshops. The defining moment of the workshop for me was on the last day. The 20 or so of us in the workshop were seated in a circle and asked to list something in our lives, followed by the phrase “….has no meaning.” The first few rounds of this were simple enough - “my car has no meaning,” “my job has no meaning,” “my house has no meaning.” Then it came to my daughter Portia. I just could not say that she had no meaning and passed on my turn. At that moment I felt that the exercise was mean spirited.

Fast forward now to a few months later. That exercise about “no meaning” keeps coming up in my head. Then one day, I just got it. And when I got it, it seemed so simple, so powerful and so clear. For this, and so many other acts of kindness: Bernie, thank you.

Acknowledgments

The technical, editorial and photographic contributions of Ed Carryer (Creativity Workshop 1994), John Feland (ME315 1995), Kos Ishii, Kristin Burns and Portia Carrryer in the production of this paper are gratefully acknowledged.