

HENRY HEIL AND SOCIOLOGY ON-LINE



Teacher Henry Heil On-Line with Cadets Nayda Migalko, and Joe Sizemore (L-R).

Henry Heil's World History class was being dismissed when I walked into his room. Cadets were talking. Talking passionately.

"But the church doesn't decide whether or not you go to Heaven or Hell," I overheard a cadet comment as he backed out of the room. The tone was friendly but heartfelt. Not everyone agreed and the students were slow to leave the class. It was clear this discussion would continue.

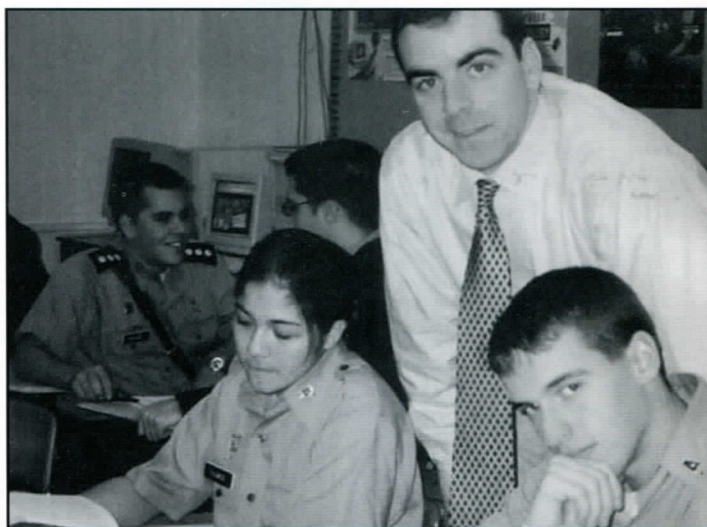
I had barely entered the classroom and it was already clear, Mr. Heil's class would be interesting. Teenagers were talking about matters of substance, respecting other's opinions, eager to continue. I had come to the right place!

The class I would be observing was Sociology 101. Eight seniors came into class and slid into place behind computers. This was no ordinary class. These students were enrolled in a web-based college class - the same class the students at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro were taking. In fact, the class had been designed by Dr. Ken Allan, a Sociology professor at UNCG.

The on-line students followed a course of study that offered numerous options and several choices for each option. In addition to the readings and assignments, there would be live, in-class discussion under Mr. Heil's direction. The students also had the opportunity to enter into e-dialogue with other sites taking the class. The world was literally at their fingertips.

The students read the computer's assigned lesson. Those who finished first volunteered to do the additional readings offered on-line. The lesson quoted studies and presented excerpts from current publications, both scholarly and popular.

When everyone had completed the basic reading, Mr. Heil convened the in-class discussion. Together the class worked through defining "family." They talked about traditional families and non-traditional ones. They realized that traditional and non-traditional depended on



Teacher Henry Heil with Sociology students Marylynn Fajardo, and Patrick Sheibley (L-R).

where one lived and on the time in history. They realized that the definition could change over time.

They examined the factors that influence a society's definition of family and of traditional and non-traditional, all influences, such as the size of the community, the needs of the community, and the needs of the individual.

Mr. Heil asked them, "Which is better? Traditional or non-traditional?" They weren't fooled. Their replies were quick. "Better for whom?" "Better for society or better for the family?" I was impressed. I observed that students here know how to think. They know how to question appropriately, how to ponder different views and make considered judgments. But what impressed me the most was the discussion that ensued as the students talked about all the different configurations of their own families - and how they were varied.

I've taught at the high school level. We've all been in high school. We remember. Being different can feel dangerous. We remember the comments. People were teased for being too big, too little, too smart, too dumb. It didn't matter. Being different meant being a target. But not in this class.

The students talked about how it felt to be different: "Left out. Judged. Alone. Rare. Interesting." They talked about their own families: two parents, one parent, all sorts of blended families, birth parents, adoptive parents, so many combinations. What impressed me was that they were all respectful of each other. Each person was accepted. That is rare.

It had to do with Mr. Heil, and the skillful way he led the discussion, with his own candor and acceptance. He set the tone. But it also had to do with your children, their maturity, their kindness, and their wisdom. That had to start at home. So I just wanted to say to you, "Good job! Keep up the good work!"

(By Lari Hatley, Academy Staff)