

If only I could learn more....

By Malcolm Keif, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo



If you are like me, you get frustrated that you can't learn as much as you'd like. As I get older, I deal with that part of life that we all (will) deal with the memory isn't what it once was. Now, where was I? Oh yeah ...

I really hate learning something new, only to forget the details a week later. The good news is that with age, we have more "context" for which new knowledge can be categorized and applied. Even though I don't have the laser-sharp memory I once had, I have much more experience and can process new knowledge faster. Learning is a necessary part of growing, both personally and professionally, and plays a particularly vital role in the life of a professional educator. The most frustrating learning situations occur when you have the opportunity, resources, time, and desire to learn, but don't have the finances to take advantage of those opportunities. For educators, those situations are all too common.

On occasion, teachers in higher education get the opportunity to take a sabbatical leave of absence to get a "learning-boost".

These opportunities come up every seven or more years in a typical University system. I know what you are thinking ... give me a break! In the real world, you'd never get the chance to take a large chunk of time off! True—but, in the University environment, sabbaticals provide faculty the opportunity to not only retool and refresh, but also research new ideas and bring back new knowledge to the classroom and program. The idea is that in the end, the organization gets smarter and the classroom experience improves for the students.

2007 was my year for a sabbatical. I applied for a six month sabbatical leave from Cal Poly for the purpose of learning more about flexography. I had an idea of companies I wanted to visit and events I wanted to attend but needed the release from the classroom for a period to get to them. At Cal Poly, if you take a sabbatical longer than three months, you must take a pay reduction. In my case, my salary was reduced by 25 percent during the sabbatical. It didn't take me long to realize that I had a dilemma on my hands. The

University gave me time off but did not increase my travel budget. On top of that, I was making 25 percent less income. Not a good situation to take advantage of the learning opportunities I had before me.

When explaining my problem to some industry friends, one couple quickly came up with a plan to solve it. In 2007, the Katherine Harper Teacher Education



Fund, managed by the Phoenix Challenge Foundation, was conceived. Ron and Katherine Harper established this fund to help educators like me retool to improve learning in the classroom. Without their support, I would never have been able to complete the travel necessary to grow and increase my expertise in flexo. The Katherine Harper Teacher Education Fund provided me with \$5,000 toward Flexo-related travel expenses.

So where did I go with the KHTE funding?

- On February 8th I attended a Western Flexo Label Association (WFLA) meeting in San Francisco where Doug Staggs from Pitman discussed how to calibrate a plate imager for a press. Since this was fairly close to home, I was able to bring two students with me to this workshop.
- On March 8th I attended the west coast FTA Flexo Roadshow. I presented at this conference about my experiences with the FlexSys Simulator. Two students also attending this workshop in San Francisco.
- On March 11th and 12th I visited Mark Andy and Rotometrics in St. Louis. Since this was first visit to either company, it was a tremendous learning experience. Both companies were very hospitable and gave wonderful tours with detailed information on their manufacturing processes. I hadn't seen how rotary dies were made so being able to see first-hand CNC milling and the quality checks that go into die making was very interesting. I had been to other press manufacturers before but since we have a Mark Andy at Cal Poly, the MA tour was of particular interest.
- On March 26th-31st I went to Charlotte, NC. There I observed my first Phoenix Challenge competition. Wow, that was a great event. I'm glad I was able to simply observe, though I did help tabulate some scores at the end of the competition. Most of my time was spent watching different techniques the students used and interacting with the judges to get their impression of how a student was doing. It was insightful in comparing the PC competitors' skills with my own students' skills. Obviously my students are collegiate level and these students were high school but there was still much to be learned.
- During that late March trip, I also visited three companies: Harper Corporation, WaterInk Technologies, and Max Daetwyler Corporation. Harper

was my first visit to an anilox manufacturer. I was a kid in a candy shop. It was fascinating and gives me new experience to bring to the classroom. I am better prepared today to explain the manufacturing process and also discuss the variables that must be controlled related to ink metering. I've been to a bunch of ink companies but my trip to WaterInk was most interesting because we have been running some G7 tests at Cal Poly and WaterInk has been making the inks for the testing. So it was nice to speak face-to-face with the actual individuals who are developing and blending the inks I use in my own lab. Daetwyler was also a first for me. I have seen lots of engravers and doctor blades over the years, but never been to a place where they are manufactured. Obviously I learned a lot.

- In mid-April, I attended the FTA – PIA/GATF Continuous Improvement Network conference. Because of my interest in Lean Manufacturing and the fact that I teach a quality class at Cal Poly, I was very interested in attending this conference and learning what converters are doing in the area of quality. While in the Jacksonville area at the conference, I visited Smurfit Preprint, my first corrugated preprint visit.
- My sabbatical travels concluded at the FTA Flexo Forum in Montreal. If you have never been to a Forum, you must go. While there, I was able to see many of my flexo friends, networked with new acquaintances, and most importantly, learned about new trends and technologies in flexo. Four Cal Poly students attended the forum with me (different funding source) and together we were able to bring back new knowledge to the classroom.

Though I've been in higher-education for nearly twenty years, this was a year of "firsts" for me. I visited several companies

for the first time. I saw manufacturing that I had never observed before. And it was my first real full-time sabbatical. People sometimes ask me what I like about being an educator. I tell them about how I enjoy the students, how I like being a positive influence on their careers, about the pleasant work environment, and other things. But the thing I like most about being an educator is that I get to spend my life being a student. Every educator is a student and learning is a central theme of our lives. We just get paid to learn.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Ron and Katherine Harper for their generous and relentless support of flexo education and flexo educators. Without their support—no matter how dire your program's financial situation is—we (flexo educators) would not be in the position we are in to prepare our students for a life-long career in flexography. Hopefully, you or one of your teachers or professors can take advantage of the KHTE fund someday. You never get too old to learn something new – you just have to work harder to remember it!



Malcolm G. Keif is an Associate Professor in the Graphic Communication Department at Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo, California, USA.

He oversees instruction in Flexographic plating and press operations at Cal Poly, as well as teaching course work in Quality Management, Cost Estimating, Web offset, and Gravure printing. Malcolm is a frequent speaker at industry conferences and the author of two books: *Lean Printing: Pathway to Success*, and *Designer's Postpress Companion*.