

Remembering Bill Hart-Davidson

Steve Benninghoff

Eastern Michigan University

Bill Hart-Davidson, as many of the online tributes and remembrances have detailed, was a man of insatiable curiosity and a profound ability to connect with people—an extremely relatable polymath. He was a fabulous listener and collaborator and was ridiculously generous with his time. As I sit here writing this, and thinking of so many moments, I can't help but smile thinking how Bill was always about play, and practice, and finding the joy in both. In this short remembrance in *Programmatic Perspectives*, I will focus on how the Bill I knew, as far back as his choosing a graduate school, was already the “programmatic Bill,” who was thinking as much about the team, and what we all “owe to the sport,” and the sport owes to society, to develop the metaphor, as he was worried about what the programs and the field could do for him. As his frequent online byline states, “Give. When in doubt, give more,” Bill practiced phronesis, always thinking both broadly and deeply about the given situation, and did his best to aid and support people—but more, to connect.

I met Bill when we were in graduate school at Purdue. I'd really only discovered rhetoric in the last class in my MA, and while I wondered where it had been hiding through my academic career, it was Bill who brought me into the field and helped me understand rhetoric both more broadly and more ethically. It was not only as a tool to “win” arguments, but more importantly how to build shared understanding and foster relationships, and how to connect and compare across different disciplines and contexts. I remember one of our first mentoring meetings for graduate teaching assistants in technical or business communication, which Bill was leading, and how he helped everyone in the group realize they did, in fact, have relevant experience for teaching TPC, even though their backgrounds were in literature or composition. In my first experience with him as a teacher, he was helping people connect and building community by bridging English disciplines. Whenever I teach invention, I explain the concept as a system comparison that allows us to transfer knowledge, however imperfect, from one context or domain to another.

At one of many meals shared with Bill, I remember he explained deciding on Purdue—he wanted a strong cohort through graduate school. His concern for larger groups and social dynamics was a frequent theme, and in multiple domains, including sports. Bill was a cross-country runner in high school, and paid for college

by working as a professional juggler. He also played pee wee baseball when he was younger. He remembered a game where he got hit by the opposing pitcher. For most of us, being hit would be the focus of that memory. But the reason he remembered it was because the next inning, his pitcher, in retribution, nailed the other team's first batter. Bill wasn't a star on the baseball field, but his elder teammate stood up for him, and Bill never forgot. Support your people. (He never hit anyone, but he did a lot of standing up for people.)

When it came to his first job, Bill again knew he wanted to be part of a team—and always knew he wanted to mentor and develop graduate students. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute was the best combination. In particular, I remember how excited he was about getting Assistant Professor of Human-Computer Interaction as his title. RPI was a great place for him to start, with tremendous colleagues, and he advised a fabulous group of graduate students into the field.

I attended my first CPTSC in 2002 by flying to Albany and driving up to Potsdam with Bill. He loved CPTSC because it saw rhetoric and technical communication as he did—it taught listening and responding as much as performance, solved problems collaboratively, and perhaps most because it went outside, beyond the classroom, into nature and the community. Bill knew the connections were there, if only we were open to building them. In all his roles, developing research centers, advising graduate students, and designing programs, this was always his key. Bill understood rhetoric and user experience in embodied, multidimensional, humanistic ways, but not just academically. It was in the way he worked with his graduate students, in the way he taught, in the way he collaborated and communicated with experts from other disciplines, and the way he thought about program development.

When Bill came to Michigan State, the program there was in a real moment, and along with his colleagues they developed several great programs: a new major in rhetoric and professional writing, the Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) research center, and the Eli feedback review system, just to name a few. But it was the experience architecture (XA) program that seems to me to encapsulate so much about Bill. Long before the field made its turn toward user experience research and design, Bill was prioritizing empathy and listening. He was so thoughtful about how so many of his actions, as a teacher, as a colleague, and as a friend, were considered in light of play, practice, and joy.

I will close by simply saying that Bill taught me lessons I take into every class, every meeting with new people, about tacit and explicit knowledge, and how rhetoric can help us collaboratively forge a better future, and he did it with a wonderful sense of humor. Many of us have similar stories, and hopefully we can support each other in the same way Bill did.

Author Information

Steve Benninghoff is Professor of English Language and Literature at Eastern Michigan University.