

Profile of Robert Bushman, McKinsey Award Winner

by Susan Reynolds

The 1992 McKinsey Award for excellence in teaching has recently been awarded to Assistant Professor Robert Bushman. A member of the accounting department, he has been consistently popular with students since he came to the GSB in 1988. "He's different," says one of his students, "when he teaches he's always running around the room, totally into whatever he's talking about."

Bushman says he uses actors and stand-up comedians as role models, "I don't take technique from them, it's just sort of the spirit of their mindsets. I don't think I do Lenny Bruce material, what I do is try to achieve that sense of total spontaneity. It's a way of opening your mind up in front of a group and letting it happen."

His academic career began as a student at Ohio University, where he earned a B.B.A. and then began working for Arthur Andersen & Co. immediately after graduation. He left Andersen because "I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life". So he took some time off and tried to figure it out. Along the way he entered the Ph.D. Program at the University of Minnesota and began teaching part-time.

"At the front end, I think a lot of it was that it was just a real rush to get up in front of people and perform - more so than anything like the noble act of teaching. It was more like it just felt good," he says.

Teaching was only a small part of his life at that time. "I was teaching maybe six hours a week. So I had a lot of time to myself. I read hundreds and hundreds of books of all types. I just lived sort of like an artist bohemian life, dabbling around in different things."



Photo by Dirk Kalf

Former leather merchant demonstrates award-winning teaching style.

"I used teaching as my economic base while I looked for other ways to make money. I'd get the Sunday paper and see jobs that looked weird or interesting and I'd call up and try them for a while."

"For example, I was a leather merchant for a time - I was a barnstormer. It was mostly motorcycle jackets and that type of stuff. I would load up a truck and every weekend I would drive to a motorcycle swap meet somewhere in the country and open up a shop."

Bushman credits those years of teaching part-time for the development of his unique style. "What I was really developing was not material but delivery, and stage presence, and communication, and ways of funneling my enthusiasm. I was lucky to have those years because that's what people are recognizing, that's why I'm winning an award like this (the McKinsey)."

Eventually, the world of formal academics drew him in. "I started studying

stuff like mathematics and I just found it really, really interesting. It turned out that as I started taking the formal aspect more seriously, not only did I intellectually expand, but my skills as a teacher went up tremendously."

Accounting turned out to be his field of choice. "It was something about it that just hit me instantly - it was like I almost knew it before I learned it. It was almost primal in the sense of wow - I know that stuff already."

He said he's tried hard not to be an accountant, but he just can't help it. "Accounting is just something I can't escape. I mean I chose it in a way, but it's almost like it's choosing me. I refer to it as Mother Accounting," he explains with a laugh. "because no matter what I do and no matter how far out I get, Mother Accounting always takes me back."

Bushman stresses that the time he spends on research complements his time in the classroom. "You don't come here unless you take the intellectual side seriously," he notes. He's currently exploring topics such as how accounting numbers are used in managerial compensation contracts and the behavior of the stock market around earnings announcements.

He's one professor everyone seems to remember. "He's got a totally unique perspective," one student said. "And he makes you tired just to watch him, he's got so much energy," another added.

"When I go in front of the class, it's like I'm living - so that's my life and the idea is to try to make your life as interesting as you can," Bushman explains. If you'd like to see him in action, he teaches 310, Financial Accounting and 317, Accounting and Financial Analysis II.