The Imposter with the Roster: How I Gave up Control and Became a Better Teacher

By Keith Starcher, Indiana Wesleyan University - keith.starcher@indwes.edu

By the spring of 2008, I had been a full-time professor for seven years and had learned (I thought) a great deal about becoming more of a “guide on the side.” But now I was at a different school and facing senior students in an advertising and promotions class. I had never taught advertising and promotions before. My marketing courses to date had all focused on strategy, market research, data analysis—I’m Mr. Logic, not Mr. Creative.

For the first time in my short-lived teaching career (after a somewhat longer career in business), I felt more like an “imposter with a roster.” These students wanted to learn the creative aspects of advertising as well as advertising strategy. I could only offer them the latter. The students and I suffered through the semester together. My end-of-course evaluations were terrible—and I knew I deserved them. I was humiliated and discouraged. What could I do?

Spring semester, 2010—the dreaded advertising and promotion course reared its ugly head again. But this time, things would be different. Why—because I was different. I was determined to do whatever it took to make that horrendous course a blessing to both me and my students. It took months, but I finally found a textbook that would help me guide the students through the advertising creative process. My plan was to use this textbook and give much of the control of the class to the 16 seniors enrolled in the course. I was up front with them about my lack of expertise in the creative marketing area. I laid out some objectives for advertising strategy and the creative aspects of advertising, but then I asked the class how we might reach those objectives, which assessments to use, what the semester-long project should look like, the timing of the major submissions for the class, etc. I am pleased to report that what we decided as a group was no less rigorous than what I would have planned for a course at this level.

After we laid out the semester calendar, the students and I really began working together. There were classes in which I lectured, but the majority of our classes were led by individual students helping their peers complete exercises from the textbook, or giving feedback on the various creative advertising projects the students were working on. I also invited several guests to our class who had much more experience than I in the world of advertising. They were well received by the students.

At semester’s end, although the final grade distribution was not significantly different from that of my other classes, my student ratings were stellar (the highest of any class that I’ve ever taught). I was further encouraged by comments like these: “I love how the semester went, I was honestly a little hesitant to like the fact that students would be ‘teaching’ a lot of the time, but now I’m glad it worked out that way.” And, “I think advertising in real life is a mix of principles and application, which is exactly what we received this semester—principles from the book (one of the best textbooks I’ve ever read) and application from class work.”

What was different in this course in 2010 compared to the course in 2008?
• From prior classes, I had developed a relationship with these students. These students trusted me.
• Although the students knew that I had high academic standards, they also appreciated my willingness to give up more than just a little control of the class—to work outside my comfort zone for their benefit.
• I selected a great textbook for what I hoped to accomplish in this course.

Do I plan to follow this methodology in my other classes? My first response is “No.” But a colleague suggested that I reconsider. Why not give
Using Google Docs as a Teaching Tool

By Beth L. Gainer, Robert Morris University, IL bgainer@robertmorris.edu

I have started using Google Documents (Google Docs) in my classes and have become quite a fan of this technology. It helps students save effort and time with assignments; it reliably backs up their work as well.

Whether used for an individual assignment or collaborative project, Google Docs provides a user-friendly interface. Students can use Google Docs to effectively create and revise documents using Microsoft Office products. All students need is a Gmail account and access to its Documents feature to open this exciting cyber world.

With Google Docs students can save their work in cyberspace rather than locally. This offers several advantages over traditional methods of creation and revision: Students do not need a flash drive, which can be lost, stolen, or broken; or a hard drive, which is only in one location and can crash. In addition, this interface saves students the hassle and confusion of downloading and sorting emailed drafts in order to work on them. Google Docs can be accessed from any computer with Internet access and allows users to store files in virtually an unlimited amount of cyberspace.

At any point in their drafting process, my students can share their papers with me and with each other for peer review. Feedback from all reviewers can be put on the same document at the same time. The document author can see comments as they are being made as well as know which individuals are providing feedback at any given time.

My students find this technology amazing. Many have reported to me that Google Docs has helped them revise, underscoring a point that I am always emphasizing in the classroom. What amazes me is students’ reactions during class time in the computer lab. Their sense of community with others in the class and with me strengthens as they watch comments suddenly appear on the very document they are writing/revising. I often hear peals of laughter as they get to witness their instructor giving feedback and in the process revising her own suggestions. Students find this mesmerizing. I find that it effectively reinforces what I teach: that revision is a necessary part of the writing process.

This works equally well with collaborative and individual assignments. When a student wants others to review a document, he or she clicks a Share button, which leads to an Invite People screen. In a box provided, the student types the email addresses of those he or she wants to be able to view and edit the document. The party or parties invited will receive notification via their Gmail inbox that they have been invited into the document. This process is intuitive, and my students easily navigate through Google Docs.

One caveat: Google Docs does have a scaled-down version of Word and therefore limited formatting abilities. Students may need to copy the draft text, paste it into a Microsoft Word document, and reformat it to the assignment requirements.

For a faculty member who is interested in bringing new, exciting technology into the classroom, the implementation of Google Docs is a good way to promote community and foster student-centered learning through a process that also develops writing skills.
Making the Most of 2,700 Minutes

By Margaret Walsh, Keene State College, NH
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Most faculty schedule at least three office hours per week—that’s 2,700 minutes a semester. If you have 135 students, that’s 20 minutes for each student. Even if you have 270, that’s still 10 minutes per student. Recently I’ve been working to make the most of these 2,700 minutes of office hours. They offer prime time for one-to-one mentoring. In the process, my thinking about office hours has shifted a bit, and I’m using my office hours in more ways. Consequently I have had a greater number of students taking advantage of this learning opportunity.

Two shifts in thinking

Rather than arbitrarily selecting any three hours during the week, I recommend selecting times that maximize the number of students who can meet with you during office hours, recognizing the constraints that today’s college students face. They may be attending college part time, working full time and commuting to campus.

1. Timing. It’s best to consult with your students before deciding when you’ll hold office hours and then schedule times that are convenient for them. In all likelihood this rules out early Monday morning or Friday evenings, and that heavily scheduled 10 to 4 time window on Tuesdays and Thursdays (on my campus at least). I recommend three different weekdays, and I wouldn’t rule out virtual office hours held at other times.

2. Staging. Move aside everything physically and psychologically that will interfere with devoting this time to students. If you share an office, stagger hours with your office mate. Use every way possible to let students know when you hold office hours; post them on your door, put them on the syllabus, position them prominently on the course website, announce them in class. Have a chair ready. Put away your cell phone. Turn away from your computer. Put peppermints in a bowl on your desk.

Seven ways to interact with students during office hours

1. Teach. Tell students that class attendance and note-taking is expected in your course, but also make clear that questions and additional help are available during office hours. Students sometimes think that professors are not willing to review content again in the office. I’m not suggesting that you do more than teach. Students are responsible for doing the hard work of learning, but you can certainly help them do that during office hours.

2. Advise. Students do come to faculty offices with forms that need to be signed. Make the most of this time by being more than a bureaucrat. Ask a few questions of your own. Listen to their concerns. What information does the student need to succeed in your program, beyond your signature?

3. Collaborate. If you encourage students to seek out additional sources on topics introduced in class and they bring material to your office, ask them about it. I am always surprised by how few students say that they are never asked direct and challenging questions about the interesting topics and projects they are working on. It’s a chance to give them practice answering questions like, “What’s your research question?” “What have you found so far?”

4. Offer books. Like me, you probably have a decent personal library. You may have some duplicate copies of key texts or know where you can buy used copies of the classics in your field. Lend them out or give them away. Geoffery Canada, the charismatic school principal and subject of Paul Tough’s Whatever It Takes, talks about a professor who gave him an unassigned statistics book from his personal collection. That book helped him pass the hardest course of his undergraduate major. My experience has been the same. I cherish those books given to me by my professors.

5. Listen well. Use all the active-listening strategies you’ve ever learned to make this meeting memorable. I recommend taking notes; jot down names, phrases, and details of the conversation so that you can refer to these topics next time you talk with the student. If you are meeting with several students on the same day, this kind of record keeping is essential.

6. Mentorship. Students do ask us questions about majors, careers, graduate school, and internships. Sharing your own educational and work trajectory can be very insightful. You can also direct students to alumni, library resources, and websites that will help them make their own decisions. If students need advice that is beyond your expertise, be prepared to say so. Know the phone numbers for student support services, and educate yourself so that you know when students need professional rather than academic assistance.

7. Student feedback. Don’t put students on the spot and ask for specific feedback on your course or department. This can put students in a difficult position. Remember that office hours are for students’ benefit. Keep every conversation professional.

2,700 minutes seems like a lot of time. It’s good to reflect on how this interactive teaching time is being spent. Are there ways to make the experience more beneficial for students?
Syllabus Redesign: Strategies That Support Students with Disabilities

By Lois A. Fisch and Laura G. Dorow, Utica College, NY, lfisch@utica.edu and ldorow@utica.edu

The syllabus, now present in virtually all courses, serves three major roles: 1) as a contract, 2) as a permanent record, and 3) as an aid to student learning. This document also serves as an information source and an advance organizer for the course. It can let students know what resources are available at the college and indicate a faculty member’s willingness to provide accommodations, support, and extra help. Because of its universal use, the syllabus becomes an ideal place to embed support and accommodations for all students, including those with disabilities.

The literature makes clear that accommodations provide opportunities rather than guarantees of success. Accommodations remove barriers that may interfere with the students’ learning and performance. Faculty at our college, with support from a U.S. Department of Education grant, have adapted their syllabi to achieve the following two goals: 1) to improve the quality of education for students with disabilities while continuing to maintain high academic standards; and 2) to make instruction, accommodations, and related services for students with disabilities a completely integrated part of the curriculum. Here are three simple rules that help achieve those goals.

Rule #1: State the obvious

• Don’t assume that students know where and how to access institutional support services offered outside the classroom. List the locations, phone numbers, and hours for services offered by math and writing labs, assistive technology resources, and tutoring programs. Let students know that these units can help them access the accommodations they might need, such as digital copies of their textbooks, or use of computers.
• Students are often concerned that their requests for help are an inconvenience to busy professors. Clearly state your willingness to provide guidance and support by encouraging students to use office hours and email.
• Let students know that you are willing to work with them to meet their individual learning needs. Provide a disabilities disclosure statement on the syllabus that explains when and how students should communicate their accommodation requirements.

Rule #2: Eliminate surprises

• Students often think that all professors share a common set of policies. Explicate the rules and consequences regarding attendance, late assignments, missed tests, acceptable forms of peer collaboration, and intellectual honesty.
• Provide clear instructions for submitting written work. It’s no longer enough to indicate a due date. Students need to know whether you want the work submitted in an email, as an attachment, via the Web, as a hard copy, or something else entirely.
• Students don’t know what you want unless you tell them. Define, in behavioral terms, your expectations for class participation, in-class behavior, time spent on readings and other out-of-class work, and their written work.
• Provide grading and criteria information up front by including your rubrics, goals, outcomes, expectations, and detailed requirements for assignments in your syllabus. That way, students will know what they need to do from the very first day of class.
• Include a calendar that lists due dates, class topics, readings, and any other scheduled class activities.

Rule #3: Format for success

• Think of your syllabus as a quick reference guide. Providing the means for your students to find relevant information quickly and easily should be your primary goal.
• Minimize distractions by keeping your overall format simple. Use fonts that are easy to read and surround blocks of text with white space.
• Redundancy can be helpful. Organize content so that students don’t have to search back and forth through your syllabus to get the information they need.
• Bold the most important information so that it is easily recognizable.

A well-designed syllabus helps you plan the course. A well-designed syllabus benefits all students, those with disabilities and those without, by making it easy for them to access information, understand your expectations, and complete assignments according to your specifications.

Online Seminar Call for Proposals

Magna Publications is accepting proposals for its online seminar series. For more information on how our online seminars work, visit www.magnapubs.com/calendar/index-cat-type.html.
To submit a proposal, visit www.magnapubs.com/mos/proposal.html.
The Challenge of Teaching Content When Test Stakes Are High

By David Scott Trochtenberg, Meharry Medical College, TN dtrochtenberg@mmc.edu

As educators, we share the challenge of how to teach an overwhelming amount of content in a short period of time to a sometimes motivated but often bored and listless student population. I do believe that most students enter higher education with a true desire to master their subject area. Some are even interested in learning for the sake of learning. But lectures overloaded with PowerPoint slides quickly change the motivation to extrinsic. This is especially true in fields where high-stakes testing determines future career options. In the case of medical school, where I work, it’s a combination of boards (testing subject knowledge) and licensing examinations. But undergraduates face similar high-stakes testing when they take medical, legal, business, or graduate entrance exams. Even a course final that counts for a large portion of the grade will do little to determ ines future career options. In the case of medical school, where I once taught anatomy, I discovered that “lectures” could be fun!

I began my class with a slide that read: “If I did not have to be here, would I?” Understandably, most of the 27 medical students in my class unconsciously shook their heads “no.” I then limited my hour-long discussion to 12 slides. There were two breaks during the didactics. During the first break I divided students into four groups. Each group had a pad of paper and instructions to write about the material I had just covered. They were not allowed to use computers, the Internet, or books. After five minutes, the pads were passed to another group, until each group had every pad once, and the final groups did not know the names of any of the writers on the pads of paper. We then discussed what was written on the pads.

My exercise for the second break was a version of the think-pair-share strategy, which students used to determine the best treatment for the disease we were discussing. After class, the students approached me and told me they had thoroughly enjoyed this class session. To my surprise, even though these students had been in classes together for more than two years, many of them said that this was the first time they got to work together in groups. Some said they had discovered that “lectures” could be fun!

But I had another surprise when I looked at the recommended practice test questions on this material. They are supposed to help students prepare for the high-stakes tests. As a practicing physician, I couldn’t answer some of the questions. I wrote what I thought were more pertinent, thought-provoking, and fair test questions; but I worry that these won’t be the ones on those tests that matter.

So I’m back to the dilemma. Are PowerPoint slides that expose students to any foreseeable question on the high-stakes exam the way to go? When I say yes, I see the bored, glazed-over student faces. I see desperate attempts to passively absorb the mountains of facts that accumulate when there are hours of back-to-back lectures in a single day. How much more rewarding it was for me as an educator to watch their boredom become enthusiasm when I made the classroom environment one of interaction and exploration.

This dilemma is one faced by many college educators teaching in programs where students face high-stakes testing. Currently, these high-stakes exams are often tests of rote memorization, not of inquiry or enthusiasm about a subject. Sharing this spirit of inquiry is the reason most of us became educators in the first place. We are teachers, not fact-reciting machines. We need to find a way out of this dilemma that compromises so much of what education should be about.

THE IMPOSTER

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up a little control to beginning students? And so, with a little trepidation, this fall I plan to trust my freshmen students by allowing them to help me with a few classroom policies—maybe even alter the design of some of their assignments. I’m eager to continue my journey from “impostor with a roster” to “first among peers” as my students and I create a dynamic learning community both inside and outside the classroom.
Why Peer Editing Matters to Majors

By Kevin Brown, Lee University, TN
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Even though more professors are using peer editing, it is being used mostly in introductory courses, not with upper-division students. We have this idea that students learn how to write in their basic courses, so we don’t continue involving peers with each other’s writing. I think there are three good reasons why we should be using peer editing in upper-division classes, especially in our major courses.

Because they need to read each other’s writing. Inevitably, I hear students talk about each other’s ability, but they do so with no firsthand knowledge of who writes well and who does not. One might wonder whether this information is useful for students, but I think knowing how others in the class write benefits students in two ways. First, those students who do write well discover or have that confirmed about themselves. When students write in a vacuum, they have no idea how talented they are, and this information can be an important part of their personal development.

Second, those students who are not as strong in writing can become aware of that fact, and then, hopefully, be a bit more motivated to work on their skills. Of course, they improve from the feedback that I and their peers give them, but they can also learn by emulation. I have seen students finally understand how to structure a longer paper or use quotations after having read and offered feedback during the peer-editing process.

I recently spoke with a colleague of mine and we remembered that, despite the fact that we had attended the same college and master’s-level program, we had never read each other’s work. In fact, throughout all of my education, I was never encouraged, either formally or informally, to exchange work with my peers, even though we all wondered how our writing compared with that of our colleagues.

Because they need to be reminded that writing is a process. We teach students that writing is a process. They are assigned drafts and outlines; they prepare note cards and do freewriting assignments—all in an effort to help experience the steps in this process. They cannot do it all at once but must go back to a piece of writing again and again. However, once they get into those upper-division courses, we stop asking for outlines, giving time to freewrite, or even requiring rough drafts. Instead, we have students submit the final product. We expect them to use our feedback to improve next semester.

I used to teach this way until a student ended up crying in my office the day after I had returned papers in an American literature class. She was upset about her grade, not surprisingly, but what changed my mind was how easily her writing problems could have been fixed. From that point on, I have required students to submit a rough draft, which I and their peers then read and return with feedback. In the five years since making the change, I haven’t had any more tears in my office.

Because it’s what we do. Part of what we do in our major courses is help students become professionals in the field. All of us work to engage students in the conversations of our disciplines. Peer editing can help us accomplish this objective. For example, we can talk about the peer-editing process that takes place between a journal’s editor and an article’s author. Most students are surprised to learn that our work is not immediately accepted, that we are, more often than not, asked to revise a paper before it is accepted for publication. We regularly ask peers to help us with these revisions, or we ask them for feedback before we submit the article. Peer review is an important part of our professional lives, and it plays an important role in many other professions as well.

Requiring peer review for upper-division students doesn’t mean we’re treating them as if they are first-year students. Rather, it’s an activity that continues to help them grow as readers and writers. Making peer editing a part of all our courses develops skills and reinforces the

A Reminder about The Teaching Professor Conference

October 31 is the deadline for submitting program proposals for the 2011 Teaching Professor Conference. The conference is scheduled for May 20-22 in Atlanta, Georgia. Go to www.teaching-professor.com for information about the conference and to find program proposal submission requirements.

I do hope you’re considering submitting a proposal. In my travels and interactions with faculty, I continue to be amazed at how many do not value their creative ideas, instructional innovations, and wise insights about teaching and learning. “Oh it’s just a simple thing I do with quizzes,” someone will say of a really creative approach that makes quizzes a much more positive learning activity. These are ideas that should be shared and The Teaching Professor Conference is a perfect venue for doing so. It provides the opportunity to preserve and pass on good pedagogical ideas and information.

The proposal development process is not onerous. And your submission will be reviewed by a conference advisory board consisting of faculty who have previously been involved with the conference.

Value what you’ve learned in your pedagogical practice by sharing it with others! ☝