Critical Pedagogy: Challenges and Concerns

It’s not always easy to differentiate between critical pedagogy, active learning, and the learner- or learning-centered approaches. Each is predicated on the notion of student engagement and proposes involvement via such strategies as collaborative and cooperative learning and problem-based learning. All recommend a move away from lecturing. Critical pedagogy is the most extreme of the three and has some unique characteristics. The authors below describe its basic tenets as eradication of the teacher-student contradiction “whereby the teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; the teacher talks and the students listen; and the teacher is the subject and the students are mere objects.” (p. 26) Critical pedagogy also has a political agenda; it views education as a means to achieve social justice and change.

Whether or not a teacher is philosophically comfortable with the principles of critical pedagogy, implementing it in the classroom presents teachers with the same dilemmas that emerge when using active learning or learner-centered approaches. The article referenced below does an excellent job of articulating some of these challenges and offering advice on how instructors might respond.

One problem that becomes clear early on is the discomfort students feel when teachers solicit their opinions and acknowledge the relevance of previous experiences. More students prefer traditional approaches—those that have them record and then regurgitate information. They aren’t used to having their voices recognized and respected, but they do quickly adapt. The next challenge for the teacher is to ratchet up the ante so that the opinions students express are informed, their views are supported, and they learn to tolerate ambiguity more constructively.

As soon as students are recognized for what they can teach (as they do in most group work settings), a whole set of challenging questions emerges for the teacher. “How do we invite students to be co-teachers if we … begin from a position of intellectual authority?” How can we let students have a say about what they learn when there is a discipline-specific body of knowledge we are expected to cover in the course? “How do we de-center authority when we are working to gain authority?” (as might be the case with new teachers, especially persons of color or women in male-dominated fields). (p. 28) The answer here is sanguine whether an instructor is using groups or giving students some say over course policies and procedures. “The goal is not to abdicate responsibilities or to deny or conceal our knowledge but to create a genuine space for students to contribute to the curriculum: ‘to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create a genuine space for students to contribute to the curriculum: ‘to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge.’” (p. 28–29—the internal quote is attributed to Paulo Freire.)

If students now have a role in making some of the decisions about learning, and teachers use authority more sparingly, what happens when it’s time to evaluate student work and assign grades? And right behind that question is one relating to appropriate assessment measures. These instructional approaches make some of the traditional assessment strategies quite inappropriate. You can’t be expecting and encouraging students to collaborate and work cooperatively on projects if the grading schematic is competitive. It is possible, though, to begin to involve students in both the generation and the critique of those rubrics that will be used to assess their work. Their involvement helps to create clear expectations and makes the whole assessment process more transparent.

These authors point out that using approaches associated with critical pedagogy is not less labor-intensive than lecturing. The same could be said for active learning and learner-centered strategies. “If we hope that students are engaged with the course material and with the outside world, then we need to demonstrate what such engagement looks like.”

Senior Faculty and Teaching Effectiveness

Now that I’m one of those “senior” faculty, I hear a lot of digs about faculty who need to retire … deadwood, still standing but hopefully about to topple. The belief that the teaching effectiveness of most “seniors” declines is strong and persistent. Is it true or yet another one of those academic myths?

Interestingly most of the research on the subject is rather dated. To believe it applies now, you must assume that senior faculty teaching today are the same as seniors were in the ’70s and ’80s. Given everything else that has changed in higher education, I’m not sure how valid the assumption might be.

Second, as with so many other topics in social science research, the limited results that do exist are not consistent. For example, one study from 1974 found that only 6 percent of the variance in ratings could be attributed to age. On the other hand, a 1989 study of 106 psychology faculty members (all faculty members are probably not like psychology faculty members) was able to document an overall negative correlation of .33 between age and general teaching effectiveness.

However, one of the definitive sources on senior faculty (see reference below), after a review of research on the topic, offers this conclusion: “In summary, no studies found a large negative association between a faculty member’s age and effective teaching. If a negative effect exists, it is small. It is clear, however, that senior faculty are interested in, committed to, and devote significant time to teaching.” (p. 31)

That last conclusion is justified in part by a study of New Jersey senior faculty who participated in a lengthy 50-question interview. The researchers wondered if these veterans still found “joy” in teaching. “The data were clear: the overwhelming majority enjoy teaching and care a great deal about student learning.” (p. 25)

That’s encouraging, but not everything that came out of these interviews was. The daily obligations of teaching keep even senior faculty very busy, leaving little time to focus on teaching per se. “Without periodic opportunities to revitalize their professional lives generally and their teaching lives in particular, faculty members report that their ‘teaching vitality’ tends to slip.” (p. 24)

And despite these needs for renewal, half of these interviewees said that they did not discuss teaching with their colleagues. Only one in 10 reported talking to colleagues about instructional topics such as books, lab materials, and student complaints. And this kind of pedagogical conversation wasn’t happening for this cohort in departmental meetings either. Only one in 14 reported that classroom teaching was discussed at those meetings. If faculty in this cohort talked about teaching, it was through some institution-wide faculty development program.

According to these data, “seniors” do care about teaching, and they don’t decline precipitously in their effectiveness as measured by student ratings. But for these folks, those who know their institutions and colleagues best, teaching remains a private, isolated activity; and if it is this way for those with years of experience, it’s not a big stretch to assume the same for faculty in all age cohorts.


Empowering Students through Choice

By Denise D. Knight, SUNY Cortland, NY
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College teachers who support writing across the curriculum sometimes wonder how to craft assignments that intellectually challenge students while at the same time investing students in the writing process. So often, students view writing as a chore rather than an opportunity. That perception can be changed by giving students some choice about how to fulfill their writing requirements. Rather than simply imposing our preferences on students, this approach enables them to assess their own strengths and interests, to make decisions accordingly, and to be accountable for the choices they make. Faculty benefit because they are no longer responsible for the choices students make. That responsibility now belongs to the students.

Offering students a choice can work in virtually any discipline that requires writing, and the options can be devised for traditional essays as well as projects that are less conventional. In a class that requires 15 pages of writing, for example, students may be given the option of submitting three five-page papers, two seven- to eight-page papers, or one 15-page paper. Because individual writing abilities tend to vary significantly, even this small choice enables students to build on their strengths as writers.

Another easy way to empower students is to have them design their own paper topics, rather than limiting them to specific subjects chosen by the instructor. This way students get to work on a project that they find exciting, rather than one that the teacher prefers. Initially, students may be intimidated by the prospect of devising their own paper topics, but the benefits are considerable. For one thing, students often produce more imaginative topics than do we. In some cases, their ideas may need to be refined and their topics narrowed, but having students “own” their topics is an important step in the writing process. To ensure that proposed essays are sufficiently focused, the instructor can have students submit the topic and tentative thesis for approval before they start writing. Taking this step reduces the likelihood that students will end up writing poorly conceived essays.

For faculty members who aren’t comfortable with shifting responsibility entirely to students, some methods blend the two by offering a “two out of three” assignment (or a “one out of two” or “three out of four,” depending on the amount of writing the course requires.) For example, in my American literature survey course, I have students choose to write two different papers from a menu comprising three options: 1) a line-by-line explication of a sonnet by an American poet, 2) a creative/research assignment, and 3) a traditional literary analysis. The results have been overwhelmingly positive.

Built into each option are still more choices. When students choose to explicate a sonnet, for example, they have a starting point around which to construct their essays. I provide three sonnets from which students select one, and I ask that they first identify poetic elements (speaker, imagery, tone, metaphors, personification, etc.) and then prepare an informative and original explication of the poem.

The second option, an exercise that combines a creative component with documented research, appeals to non-English majors who aren’t always skilled in literary interpretation. Students who choose this assignment select a work from the course readings and design an illustration that depicts a character, scene, symbol, or theme reflecting the cultural norms of the historical period in which the literary work is set. In addition to creating an illustration, students provide both a written analysis of their design (i.e., what it is intended to depict and how it illuminates an aspect of the work) and a research-based overview of the critical reception that the work garnered when it was first published.

The third option, a straightforward literary analysis, requires students to analyze one of the formal elements in a literary work, without reliance on external sources. I provide students with several examples of critical analyses, but they are ultimately responsible for selecting a work, for designing their topic, and for generating a viable thesis.

Giving student writers choice benefits instructors too. Rather than continually reading different versions of the same writing assignment, we end up evaluating a much wider range of essays. Not only does this practice encourage students to showcase their strengths, whether they be research skills or analytical abilities, but it also enables instructors to learn something more about their students. Offering writing options across the curriculum is a win-win situation for faculty and students alike.

A Follow-up on the Midwife Metaphor

In a recent issue, I shared how much the teacher-as-midwife metaphor means to me. I noted in passing that I’d read some quibbles about who first made the comparison. That prompted reader Glenn Hartz, who just happens to be a philosopher, to note that credit for originating the metaphor probably goes to Socrates. Interesting … none of the quibbles I’ve read mentioned this venerable source.

If you’d like to read what Socrates says about the metaphor, check out this website supplied by Professor Hartz: www.phy.ilstu.edu/pte/209/content/taetetus.html.
Teaching vs. Research: Finally, a New Chapter

The argument persists: teaching and research are complementary—each in some synergistic way builds on and supports the other. Standing against the argument is an impressive, ever-growing array of studies that consistently fail to show any linkage between teaching effectiveness and research productivity. Because administrators have a vested interest in faculty being able to do both well, the two sides continue to exchange arguments and accusations in a debate that has grown old, tired, and terribly nonproductive.

Could it be that the two sides are actually debating different propositions? That’s what Michael Prince, Richard Felder, and Rebecca Brent (all well-known in the field of engineering education) propose in the article referenced below. The first proposition rests on the notion that research has the potential to support teaching. The second is arguing whether it has done so in practice, and the evidence supporting that it has not is comprehensive and persuasive. (Many of the studies supporting this conclusion have been highlighted in previous issues of the newsletter).

In an extraordinarily well-referenced article, these authors move the discussion forward by exploring the effectiveness of three strategies that could strengthen the research–teaching nexus: 1) bringing research into the classroom, 2) involving students in undergraduate research projects, and 3) accepting broader definitions for scholarship. They review the literature to see whether and how much each of these strategies has improved undergraduate teaching, ways each nexus might be strengthened, and what further research questions merit attention.

Briefly, here’s what they discovered about each. “Integrating research into the classroom in the way integration is normally conceived—i.e., instructors discussing the content of their research—has not been shown to occur frequently or to improve instruction.” (p. 286) What these authors propose as a richer potential nexus are those forms of teaching (inquiry-based approaches and problem-based learning, for example) that mirror the research process. In this case, “a faculty member’s research provides experiences that have the potential to enrich instruction by introducing students to the research process and to important research skills.” (p. 285)

The effects of undergraduate research experiences have been studied in some detail. Does the opportunity for students to be involved in research projects strengthen the teaching–research nexus by producing better learning for the student? The authors answer that question with a qualified yes. Involvement in undergraduate research does correlate positively with retention and with the decision to pursue graduate study. Students evaluate their experiences positively and say those experiences helped them learn. But direct evidence of impact on learning is scant. “[T]here is very little evidence that undergraduate research has much of an effect on students’ content knowledge.” (p. 288) Another limitation of this nexus: very few students have the opportunity to be involved in undergraduate research projects, and those that are tend to be the very best students. [For more on undergraduate research, see “Undergraduate Research Opportunities” in this issue.]

As for whether broader definitions of scholarship make it easier for faculty to integrate their research and teaching work, the authors found “limited but encouraging evidence” that these models do help faculty make stronger connections between teaching and research.

It is time to move past the old teaching vs. research debate and this article provides a new and useful way to consider and talk about these related but very different parts of a faculty member’s job. “The primary goal of research is to advance knowledge, while that of teaching is to develop and enhance abilities. Researchers are valued mainly for what they discover and for the problems they solve, and teachers for what they enable their students to discover and solve.” (p. 283)


How Much Control for How Much Learning?

For quite some time now I’ve been interested in a widely held set of assumptions faculty make about the need to assert control at the beginning of a course. The argument goes something like this: When a course starts, the teacher needs to set the rules and clearly establish who’s in charge. If the course goes well, meaning students abide by the rules and do not challenge the teacher’s authority, then the teacher can gradually ease up and be a bit looser about the rules. The rationale behind this approach rests on the assumption that if a teacher loses control of a class, it is very hard to regain the upper hand. In these cases, student behaviors have compromised the climate for learning so seriously that the teacher has an ethical responsibility to intervene and reassert control.

But these examples are also extreme and, in my experience, rare. Far more common are classroom environments where the teacher is so in control that students passively perform what look like learning tasks (taking notes, feigning attention, etc.). Lately I’ve been wondering how much control is necessary to set the condi-
On CDs That Skip and Papers with Editing Mistakes

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“How many of you would keep listening to a CD—even of your favorite band—if the CD regularly skipped?” That’s the question I ask my students. Although the question keeps evolving (and now that students have abandoned CDs for iPods, I may have to come up with another analogy), my point doesn’t change. Even in pleasurable pursuits, we tolerate distractions or interference only to a degree, after which we abandon the activity. For too many years, I felt obligated to toil through student papers that were the editing equivalent of a badly scratched record (for those who remember the days of vinyl). No more.

I now tell my students that when I read their final drafts, I am willing to overlook a few minor editing-level errors, but I will stop reading if the accumulation of errors becomes too great. Along with their paper assignments, I provide all my students—with a paper checklist. It states, “No matter how brilliant your ideas are, if they are poorly packaged, I cannot appreciate them.” Sometimes, I offer another analogy: a paper with brilliant ideas that is poorly edited is the equivalent of a designer dress made of expensive fabric that has, nevertheless, been poorly cut or unevenly stitched. Such a dress would attract few buyers. When student ideas are less sophisticated but presented without a myriad of usage errors, I compare these essays to off-the-rack clothing made from more economical fabric that, nevertheless, has been carefully stitched and neatly pressed. By refusing to read poorly edited papers, I’m trying to teach students that all writers must attend to those aspects of writing that enhance the readers’ understanding and enjoyment.

Even though student writing skills vary considerably, I am still convinced that all students can attend to the “packaging” of their ideas. Those who don’t bother to do so are clearly making a choice. And it is legitimate, then, for faculty to respond by choosing not to invest time reading what students have chosen to care so little about. Since I instituted my policy of not reading papers that don’t adhere to the checklist, not only have students uniformly done a better job of editing, but I have stopped reading and subsequently failed only three papers.

I teach English, so my paper checklist includes items about appropriate citation form, punctuation around quotations, appropriate tense for literary analyses, underlining of book and journal titles, and admonitions to spell check and proofread, among others. Obviously, paper checklists could be developed and tailored to the particular kinds of writing required in various disciplines.

My analogy of listening to a flawed CD helps students understand why I find it so difficult to read an essay riddled with surface-level errors. They learn why careful editing is important. Providing the checklist clarifies expectations, and I find it helps students become more invested in their work as they cultivate habits that may just carry over to their writing for other courses as well.

CONTROL FROM PAGE 4

Questions for learning and whether that amount of control doesn’t need to be offset by a certain amount of freedom so that students can make the learning experience meaningful to them. And then there’s the question as to how teacher control affects the motivation to learn? Do students learn more or learn better in classrooms that are rule bound?

More fundamentally, I’ve been wondering if those assumptions about needing to establish control at the outset are supported by evidence, experiential or otherwise. What happens if you don’t? Do students automatically rise up and take control? Why do I have such trouble imagining students doing that? They seem so beaten down already.

More sinister are questions of whether teachers don’t benefit more from the control they assert than students do, even though most faculty I know would go to their graves arguing that they only control for the students’ sake. A tightly controlled classroom environment certainly makes for safer, saner teaching. If all potential challenges to authority are headed off at the pass, then the teacher can devote full attention to the content, and isn’t that where the teacher’s expertise really shines? And so the classroom becomes a place that showcases teaching more than learning?

My suspicion is that most teachers overreact to potential threats. Why? Do they question whether they can respond successfully to challenges? Are they in denial about the vulnerabilities that are inherently a part of teaching? Do they like this feeling of control? Depending on the teacher, all these answers may be possibilities, but I think for more teachers, it’s a matter of not trusting students or having lost faith in all of them because of the actions of a few.

It is true that students unused to the rigors of college learning look for the loopholes. They opt for the easy way—so if the teacher stands idly by, they will not demand much of themselves or their classmates. Most of today’s college students aren’t going to do well in an environment where there are no rules, little structure, and low expectations, but the question is how much do they and their teachers need and how is the learning environment compromised when teachers err on the side of rigid control?

Ed’s note: This article ends with a question that I’m still asking myself. If you have some ideas, opinions, or insights, email the editor at grg@psu.edu.
Talk about Teaching That Benefits Beginners and Those Who Mentor Them

Beginning college teachers benefit when they have an instructional mentor. That fact is well established; as is the fact that mentoring benefits those who mentor. The influx of new faculty over the past few years has caused mentoring programs to flourish. All kinds of activities have been proposed so that mentors and mentees can spend their time together profitably. Addressed less often are those instructional topics particularly beneficial for the experienced and less-experienced teachers to address. Here’s a list of possibilities.

Talk about teaching that gets past the pleasantries and basic techniques. Most new teachers do need help with the mechanics. But details about how many points for extra credit, what prevents late papers, and whether students should eat in class should be part of a first conversation. They should not dominate subsequent exchanges. Early on, new teachers need to realize that real instructional issues are much more complex and much more intellectually intriguing. Mentors can help new faculty talk about teaching on a different level—the level of questions without easy answers and the level that reveals how much more there is to learn about teaching and learning.

How to put student ratings in perspective. Most college teachers don’t get their best student ratings in the first courses they teach. But most new college teachers do take early ratings more seriously than those received subsequently. Much like beginning (and sometimes not-so-beginning) writers, new teachers have trouble separating themselves from the performance. So it’s beneficial to have a colleague who’s been around for a while, who can look objectively at a set of ratings and say something like, “Well, if these were my ratings, here are the three things I’d conclude.”

Help seeing syllabus construction as the design of learning environments and the construction of learning experiences. For beginning teachers, there’s the mechanical question of what goes on a syllabus—it’s a pragmatic question and often needs to be answered in a hurry. But syllabus construction is not just about what happens in the course and when. It’s really about course design. The policies placed on a syllabus convey what the teacher believes contributes to learning. Assignments dictate the terms and conditions under which students will have their most in-depth encounter with the content. A mentor can help a new college teacher see beyond the details and look for the assumptions on which a policy or practice rests.

Reminders that exams not only assess learning, they promote it. Too often faculty (not just new teachers, although new teachers are particular susceptible) see exams as the means that allows them to gauge and then grade student mastery of material. Faculty forget that exams promote learning. They “force” an up-close and personal encounter with the content of the course. Students review their notes, they read the text, they ask each other questions, they decide what’s important, and they make guesses about what they need to know for the exam. All these activities promote the learning of course material. Together, the teacher with experience and the new teacher can talk about how exam events can be designed so as to maximize their inherent learning potential.

Warnings about the folly of predicting who will and won’t make it in the course/major. Making judgments about who is and who isn’t going to succeed in the course is natural, and with experience, the accuracy of those calls improves but doesn’t mean it’s always reliable. Honest teachers have lots of stories about how badly they missed. What any teacher must avoid is letting students think that the teacher doesn’t believe they have what it takes. Yes, teachers do need to give students accurate feedback about their performance in a course and what that level of performance will lead to if it continues. But that’s very different than saying or

We’ve Started a Blog

Maybe you saw the note in the last couple of issues—we’ve started a Teaching Professor Blog. Find it at http://teachingprofessor.blogspot.com/

This is a new adventure, especially for an editor who’s worried that she may be way too old to blog. But I am still game to explore any venue for exchanging good ideas and information about teaching and learning.

At this early stage, I’m not sure what would be most useful and interesting to our newsletter readers (and others … blogs are free, you know). I’m trying a variety of different kinds of notes and formats. I do know I want this to be a scholarly and provocative kind of exchange—something that makes us think, gives us good ideas, raises questions, inspires, renews, and occasionally makes us laugh.

I’m reading lots of different kinds of blogs, looking for ideas and thinking about how this venue can be used to promote better teaching and more learning.

I’d love it if you’d check us out, subscribe if you’re so inclined, contribute to the conversation if you see something that merits response, and offer feedback. I see it as a chance for us to have a different kind of conversation about our work with students.
Undergraduate Research Opportunities

Any number of national reports and prominent higher education organizations have called for more research opportunities for undergraduates. The authors of the study referenced below wondered if those calls were being heeded. More specifically, they wondered how the opportunities compared across the different types of institutions. For example, did students at research universities complete more undergraduate research projects? They also wondered if the number of research opportunities was a function of discipline. Were some fields more likely to provide opportunities than others?

To answer these questions they used data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire that is administered to thousands of students across many different institutional types.

As for the findings, “first, student engagement in research-related activities increased from the mid-1990s in all types of institutions and in all major fields.” (p. 171) That’s the good news. The second finding is a bit surprising and not as promising. “Research universities do not lead the pack in terms of the frequency with which undergraduates engage in research activities relative to their counterparts attending other types of colleges and universities.” (p. 172) In general those experiences were offered more regularly at such institutions as selective liberal arts colleges, and that was true regardless of major.

The researchers suggest several reasons why undergraduates don’t get to do more research at research universities. At these institutions, graduate students, who have more knowledge and research experience than undergraduates, are available to work with faculty on research. The faculty-student ratio at research universities also tends to be high, and that effectively limits how many undergraduates a faculty member can work with.

Various analyses (including the one in this issue that highlights a review of research by Prince, Felder, and Brent) document that despite these increases, undergraduate research opportunities are made available to a comparatively small number of students overall and that the students invited to do research are only the very brightest.

And the researchers make this very important point. “As with other effective educational practices, such as service learning or first-year seminars, just because a student has the experience doesn’t necessarily mean that it will enrich learning or be developmentally powerful.” (p. 175) The impact of the experience depends on the nature of the relationship between student and teacher, the nature of the research opportunity, how long the student gets to work on it, and what kind of feedback the student receives during the experience.


Guiding Student Reflection

When learners reflect, they thoughtfully consider (or reconsider) an experience. If the reflection is critical, it challenges the customary ways of understanding or explaining an experience. Critical reflection questions meanings and looks at assumptions. The opportunity to reflect on experiences develops critical thinking skills and helps students to learn things for themselves.

This kind of reflection is particularly important for students in professional programs where the goal is not just to develop content knowledge but to help students acquire the skills that will enable them to function competently in professional situations. When students do not have much experience in professional settings, they need to learn as much as possible from their experiences. This requires the kind of reflection that occurs when they return to the experiences, recall what happened, think about what they assumed, consider what might have happened if they had taken a different course of action, and thoughtfully consider what they learned from the experience.

However, students are not born knowing how to reflect on experiences, critically or otherwise. In fact, the authors of the article referenced below were motivated to intervene in students’ attempts to reflect (in this case on clinical experiences in a nursing program) when they noted the wide variation in how students wrote about their experiences. They decided that what students needed was a “structure that would help them make more in-depth descriptions of clinical experiences and their thinking about those situations.” (p. 513)

They developed a guide for reflection based on a clinical judgment model from their field. The guide lists a series of prompts that the instructions say will “help you tell the story of the situation you encountered.” (p. 515) There are prompts that solicit descriptions of relevant background details, others that ask what the student noticed, a set of prompts that encourage interpretation of the situation, more that have the students delineate their responses, and a question that asks about reaction to the response. The guide ends with a series of prompts that help students
Stress Relief for Teachers: A Little Black Book

By Bob Eierman, University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire reierman@uwec.edu

It’s mid-November and the weather is turning cold. The same can be said about the attitudes of my students as well as some colleagues. We have all been riding the academic roller coaster for more than 11 weeks, and in most semesters I am stressed and straining to stay civil by this point. However, this fall my world is a little brighter, a little less frantic, and a bit more fun. Perhaps I’ve reached the point in my career where I’ve succumbed to the tsunami of work and stress, but I don’t think so. I think life is better because I’ve been using my little black book.

This little black book is a three-by-five-inch bound, ruled notebook. I spend the first five minutes of every day writing in it. I started writing daily because my daughter gave me the book and I wanted to fulfill the promise of her gift, but along the way I’ve become a convert. I haven’t missed a day of writing in my black book this whole semester.

I write first thing—before I touch computer, book, or paper. I write about what’s on my mind. I don’t plan ahead, I just write. I fill one page in the book, about 100 words. Most days the topics center on my teaching, but if other life issues pop into my mind, into the text they go. Surprisingly, I have found that my daily writing has affected my outlook, my organization, and my productivity. How can this simple exercise be having such a profound effect on my whole semester? I think it has something to do with the things I have accomplished in my daily writing.

Here are some examples.

- I have reflected on the cycles in the semester and anticipated what’s next, for example, I was “ready” to write and grade the first big exam because I’d pondered it the week before.
- I have thought about relationships with students, colleagues, and family, which has improved them, for example, I anticipated grumpy students after they got their midterm grades.
- I have given myself “written pep talks” that have helped me through the tough parts of my job, such as the piles of grading and onerous committee work.
- I have returned homework papers more promptly because when writing I was reminded how important they were to student learning.
- I have dedicated myself to writing more professionally, and I did it, submitting two manuscripts plus this reflective piece.
- I have relished the small victories I’ve achieved and good work I’ve done by writing about them in my little black book.

I think this is professional development at its best. The brief time alone with my writing has stimulated a variety of changes in my outlook. Even though the benefits of journal writing have been well established, in my academic discipline (chemistry) and many other sciences, it is not regularly practiced, and had you asked me about it before, I would not have been convinced of its benefits. But this semester I’ve discovered that a daily five-minute write is a satisfying way to begin each day on a positive and reflective note. This kind of writing has helped sustain me and improve my productivity. I have come to believe in stress relief through a little black book.

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subtly conveying that a student doesn’t have the intellectual muscle required to master the material. Students need teachers who believe in them and who recognize that ultimately, the decision about success or failure is one that students make.

Wise advice on classroom management. Not being seasoned, confident pedagogues, new teachers can be suckers for rules, especially those that make clear the teacher’s authority over life in the classroom. New teachers need to learn that the attraction to rules grows out of an interesting conundrum. Despite having lots of power over students, teachers are not in control of the classroom. It takes time and encouragement from a mentor to learn that students can be trusted—not believed in blindly, but trusted enough for teachers to show them respect and believe that it will be returned.

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articulate what they learned from the experience. This particular guide (which appears in the article) is specific to nursing, but it could easily be adapted to other clinical or field experience situations.

The guide was developed to help students, but it benefits faculty as well. It provides a “window” into student thinking about experiences. This can be especially helpful when faculty have not observed a student in a particular situation.

The authors recommend using a guide like this more than once in a course. “Consistent use of the guide throughout a course provides students with repetitive practice using a specific process to consider patient care and clinical practice.” (p. 516) This way the guide becomes a rubric that students can take with them into any professional experience.