Many teachers begin new courses using a form to collect student information. Whether handwritten or gathered electronically, these surveys ask students for information about themselves: name, phone, email address (the one that’s checked!), advisor’s name, campus address, prior courses in field, and reasons for taking the course. Some of the information requested depends on campus location. In my case, severe weather sometimes threatens on-campus course delivery, and I need contact information for students.

Beyond this, start-up surveys can be used to launch the important work of teaching and learning for the rest of the course. In addition to collecting the general information, I experiment with other kinds of questions, and sometimes the results are so helpful that a question gets a permanent place in my survey.

Here is the recent winner:

“In a couple of sentences, describe one class—in any field—that contributed the most to your learning (not necessarily the class you LIKED the most, but the one in which you LEARNED the most). Briefly include what it was about that class that made this true.”

Even though their answers aren’t always precisely attuned to the directive—students may describe a “course” or a “teacher” instead of a “class”—the responses are always pedagogically useful in a number of ways:

1) Responses to questions like these help me get to know students early in the term.

• Each answer offers a sample of thinking and writing about something that should matter to the students and is refreshingly different from what they usually get asked. Here someone is asking for their opinion about something they know, and this might serve as a first step to later work with evidence-based opinion. It also provides an indicator of how accurately students read open-ended queries.

• Their responses reveal a little about what they think learning is and what their preferred approach to learning might be—things that will help me respond to the range of learning preferences in any one class. I loosely list these preferences to remind me to vary my teaching approaches, and I use them to place students with partners or in groups when they work together on an assignment.

2) Answers to this question can help students know themselves better as learners.

• It explicitly distinguishes the “teaching that results in learning” from teaching that is mostly entertainment—however enjoyable that might be.

• It begins or—if you’re lucky—continues students’ metacognitive awareness of teaching and learning. It contributes to a kind of “naked pedagogy” that invites students to see that faculty think about teaching and learning, and they plan for more than just course content. This insight can be furthered by a quick debriefing of their answers in the next class, sharing anonymously examples of how individuals appreciated the different approaches faculty use to nurture learning.

3) The fruits of this exercise can extend to the greater academic community.

• I sometimes photocopy student responses (anonymously) to send them to faculty whose classes were identified for praise, along with a...
Teaching Something You Don’t Like: A Model That Works

By Veronica T. Rowe, University of Central Arkansas – VRowe@uca.edu

I am not a history buff and do not enjoy teaching or learning about history in general. So, as an instructor who is required to teach the history of my field, I have had a difficult time finding an interesting way of relaying the information. Needing a new approach, I decided to see if I could adapt the Family Involvement Model (http://www.mvc.dccc.edu/Academics/acaddivisions/Absf/fipre/Pages/default.aspx). This research-based model found that when family members are involved in the courses of Latino college students, their persistence and success in higher education improves. The model is based on the idea of including family to promote students’ education. It supports the old premise that you really don’t understand something unless you can convey that knowledge to another person.

Students enrolled in my class taught a family member about the history of our profession, occupational therapy. At the beginning of the course, I explained that we’d be using this model to learn the history. I assigned readings about our history and then presented other historical material in class. After reading and listening to this historical content, students were asked to complete a self-reflective learning audit at the end of class. They were given five minutes to write down every historical fact they could remember.

Then students went home and gave a history lesson to their family members. They administered pre- and post-tests to document changes in family members’ knowledge, and they chose how to present the content. At the next class session, I tested the students’ knowledge of this historical material. I also asked them to answer several quantitative and qualitative questions about their family members’ involvement. At the end of the course, student volunteers partici-
The winner of the 2011 Maryellen Weimer Scholarly Work on Teaching and Learning Award was announced at the recent Teaching Professor Conference in Atlanta. This award (recently renamed in honor of your editor, thank you very much), given annually with a $1,000 stipend, recognizes an outstanding piece of pedagogical scholarship published within the previous two years. This year more than 110 articles were submitted and nominated. The selection was made by an award review committee composed of authors, journal editors, and faculty developers. This year, in addition to the winner, two finalist articles were selected.

Winning Article (a two-part article)


This two-part article was highlighted in the March 2009 issue of The Teaching Professor, well before it was nominated for this award. Here’s what your editor wrote about it in that issue. “Both of these articles show how the preparation and regular revision of teaching philosophy statements provide important growth opportunities for teachers. They describe a process that can make the preparation of a teaching philosophy statement a challenging and rewarding intellectual endeavor, a process that puts ‘philosophy’ back into teaching philosophy statements. Both articles are another great illustration of really outstanding pedagogical scholarship done within the boundaries of a discipline but with relevance to every discipline. They are two of the most thought-provoking, informative, and useful articles I have read on teaching philosophy statements.”

This article was the recipient of another award: The Fritz Roethlisberger Memorial Award, recognizing it as the best article published in the Journal of Management Education in 2009. It is indeed a piece of scholarship not to miss.

Finalist Articles


This article will be highlighted in an upcoming issue of the newsletter.


An article offering highlights from this article is included in this issue of the newsletter.

Watch The Teaching Professor website (www.teachingprofessor.com) for information regarding the 2012 award. You may submit your own work, and we strongly encourage the nomination of excellent articles you have read. Those of us who benefit from this scholarship and believe in it need to advance it for the recognition it deserves.

Reflecting on Learning

FROM PAGE 1

brief explanation of the exercise. It’s a little reward that might provide a moment of pleasure or an incentive to try to replicate those moments for other students. In my fondest dreams, I envision an entire community of teachers sending each other such teaching valentines, thereby helping us to better value what we do in the classroom.

- Costs vs. benefits: Adding such a prose item to the information survey takes a little extra class time and about half an hour more of my time to read and select the responses I’ll use in class. I also spend a few minutes in class sharing what I’ve learned about the students’ learning preferences and using some of their words (anonymously) to acknowledge that the teaching-learning relationship we are beginning really matters. I require this survey from students adding the course late as well.

The question can also prove effective later in the term—either by itself or linked to a midterm evaluation, as in the variation below:

“In a couple of sentences, describe the class or experience from this course that contributed the most to your learning (not necessarily the class you LIKED the most, but the one in which you think you LEARNED the most) and what about that class made this true.”
Getting Over Learning Styles

By Larry Spence, Penn State University
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There is a landfill of studies—more than 3,000 articles and 600 books. If you Google “learning styles” you will get 9.7 million hits in 0.16 seconds. “Learning styles workshops” produces 7.8 million hits and even “critiques of learning styles” garners 460,000 items. By the numbers of instruments, handbooks, and workshops advertised online, learning styles must be a sizable industry.

By the numbers of instruments, handbooks, and workshops advertised online, learning styles must be a sizable industry. But after diving into the pile, my mind was full of grit and cynicism. A zealous quest has created claims and theories so bad they aren’t even wrong. There had to be something useful in all this effort or despair would settle over me like so much dust.

The periodic critiques of the research make the same points. 1) We don’t know what learning styles are. Researchers haven’t agreed on whether they are attributes, preferences, habits, strategies, or biological traits. We don’t know if they are cognitive, neurological, psychological, or situational. 2) The reliability and validity of the many instruments created to measure styles are regularly challenged. 3) No convincing data links learning styles to improved learning. Since the 1970s, critics have been making these points. They pretty much conclude that if you want to predict achievement for a particular learning style or match a teaching method to a learning style, you would have as much chance of success using sign of the zodiac.

But I did find some jewels buried in the landfill. Learning style ideas grew out of classroom wisdom. Given any pedagogical effort, some students learn and some do not. Every teacher encounters students who seem to learn in unexpected ways. Every student sometimes gets stumped by methods that work for everyone else. Thus 40-plus years of self-serving replications and furious critiques make abundantly clear that people learn in different ways. Neuroscientists agree that every brain is unique—more singular in structure than DNA or fingerprints.

This is good news in the sense that students never just replicate their culture. Despite fears, there isn’t much danger of schools turning out slobganeering automatons. The sobering news is that we haven’t figured out how to deal with this diversity in learning. We decide what to do in the classroom based on crude averages or on the techniques that we like or do best, leaving many students to flounder or figure out how to learn on their own.

To paraphrase artificial intelligence pioneer Marvin Minsky, there is no such thing as a typical student because each brain contains many different kinds and combinations of resources. Neuroscience research suggests that the brain is not one general learning system but consists of many specialized modules developed over eons of evolution. While those modules vary, their network connections differ even more depending on genetics and experience. Thus every student brings to the classroom wiring, experiences, assumptions, and hidden semi-autonomous processes that we call euphemistically “prior knowledge.”

For example: Some students do well by starting with abstractions and working down to the concrete details. Others prefer to begin with examples and generalize abstractions. Some learn in brief spurts and others in extended periods. Fooling around works and dedicated attention works. Students may do well by solving many easy problems while others thrive by struggling with a few hard ones. Success promotes learning in some students while failure works better for others. Some students learn impulsively, leaping into complex problems and flailing until they get a handle, while other take their time and reconnoiter carefully before proceeding to solutions. We aspire to teach in ways that promote learning, but any rule we set makes it easy for some and impossible for others.

Is there a way to cope with this bewildering array of learning options? Suppose we acknowledged that the most important work in the classroom is the work of learning that students do. Since the research on learning styles has failed to confirm that we present material can improve student learning, maybe we should focus on what students do with course materials and think of our role more as managing a work team than transmitting metaphorical “content.”

All this beavering away at learning styles could pave the way to a focus on what students actually do to learn. Instead of asking them banal questions about what they like or if they like us, why not ask them directly about how they learn? We could ask questions such as, “What is learning? How do you do it? Tell us about learning that was valuable, joyful, or interesting to you. How do others best support your efforts to learn?” Answers to those questions would help teachers and students understand learning.

Muska Mosston once differentiated teaching types by who made the learning decisions—teacher or student. He conceived a spectrum that ran from command, where instructors make all the decisions, through problem solving, where students make most decisions, to self-directed learning, where students make all decisions. Mosston’s ideas came from coaching. We often think of exemplary athletic performances as automatic, but that is an oversimplification. Repetition means predictability, and that gives advantage to your opponent. Elite players learn to adjust their performance to ongoing conditions. Athletes must become self-coaching to make quality decisions in the rapid changes of games.

One of the outcomes of students making decisions about how they will learn and what standards of performance they will strive for is customization. Students do the customization within
How Reflective Is That Reflection?

Promoting reflection is a goal endorsed by many faculty. They believe that students need to develop skills that will enable them to look at a piece of work they produce or an aspect of their professional practice and make accurate judgments about it. It’s not an easy skill to acquire, and practice is essential to its development. If teachers are giving students opportunities to reflect, they need to be able to assess how well students are reflecting and provide feedback that deepens the students’ skills.

The concept of reflection isn’t all that easy to define, even though interest in promoting it is now widespread. David Kember and a group of collaborators reviewed the literature on reflection and consequently proposed these definitions. “Reflection operates through a careful reexamination and evaluation of experience, beliefs, and knowledge.” “Reflection most commonly involves looking back or reviewing past actions, though competent professionals can develop the ability to reflect while carrying out their practice.” (p. 370)

Most commonly teachers promote student reflection via written assignments. They use assignments like journals and have students respond to case studies or take part in online discussions. Kember and his collaborators have developed a scheme that can be used to assess the level of reflection seen in these kinds of written work. They point out that this is not a precise measure but can provide guidelines that will prevent purely subjective assessment of the work. They also recommend that these levels are best applied to a whole paper rather than to individual sections of it. They identify four levels of reflection, described in detail in their article and highlighted below.

Habitual action—“In professional practice, habitual action occurs when a procedure is followed without significant thought about it.” (p. 373) In the case of students it occurs when a student offers an answer without attempting to understand it. Students exemplify this level when they plug-and-chug a formula or follow the steps in a lab manual without any consideration of what they are doing or why. In writing, at this level students look for material that answers the question. Sometimes they plagiarize that answer; more often they paraphrase or summarize it, but without any real understanding. When asked, they cannot explain what they have written.

Understanding—In this case, there is an attempt to understand the topic or concept. Although students may search for underlying meaning, at this level, there is still no reflection. “The concepts are understood as theory without being related to personal experiences or real-life applications.” (p. 373) Most students begin at this level. In their writing they rely heavily on what the textbook or teacher has said. They will report that content accurately and with understanding but do not add any personal response to it.

Reflection—At this level, students not only have accurate understanding, they reflect on that understanding and are able to relate it to personal experiences, or they can make practical applications. If students are writing about professional experiences, those experiences “will be considered and successfully discussed in relationship to what has been taught. There will be personal insights that go beyond book theory.” (p. 374)

Critical reflection—This highest level of reflection implies the transformation of a perspective. “Many of our actions are governed by a set of beliefs and values that have been almost unconsciously assimilated from our experiences and environment. To undergo a change in perspective requires us to recognize and change these presumptions.” (p. 374) Teachers should not expect this level of reflection early or often as students are developing reflective skills. Even professionals don’t change what they believe on a weekly basis. Education does cause transformative changes in students more often because early on students don’t have ingrained concepts about a field or knowledge domain. But critical reflection is a process that generally takes place over time. Students start by recognizing their beliefs and accompanying assumptions. Something (new information, new experiences) disrupts that belief system, thereby forcing students to reconstruct or reform it.


Learning Styles

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the teachers’ framework. Teachers don’t attempt to do the impossible—predict students’ learning variations and design appropriate exercises. The teaching task becomes how to design a classroom situation that maximizes students’ opportunities to choose and to learn from the results of those choices.

Teachers then can focus on their most creative work—observing students’ actions and interceding to correct them. What do learners do with course materials? How do they tackle problems? What assumptions do they use? What do they do when they fail? Answers to those questions would most definitely improve our teaching.

A bit surprised, I ended up leaving the landfill hopeful.
Professional Faculty Development: The Necessary Fourth Leg

By Alan Altany, Georgia Southern University - aaltany@georgiasouthern.edu

The well-known three-legged stool of academic life—teaching, research, and service—has been assumed to cover the main responsibilities of faculty in academic communities. But is there a missing leg that would add strength and stability to the stool? I propose there is. It’s professional faculty development, and I would also propose that faculty committed to teaching should be its most articulate advocates. Here’s a list of the reasons why professional development plays a critical role in the ongoing growth of teachers. Professional development does support all aspects of academic careers, but understanding its importance to teaching is my emphasis here.

• Professional development promotes faculty responsibility for continuous, career-long growth based upon not only the trial and error of experience, but also theory, research, and professional collaboration with colleagues.
• The understanding of instructional concepts and teaching processes can be expanded and deepened via professional development.
• Good teaching is not just a “you have it or you don’t” skill, nor is it an automatic companion of terminal, disciplinary degrees. It is an action, process, and way of thinking and as such it constitutes serious, complex intellectual work. It requires regular reflection and exposure to new ideas and information that are inherently a part of good professional development activities.
• Professional faculty development connects faculty across disciplines and career stages, serving to create a pedagogical community within the college or university.
• Professional development is not remedial or something only for those having problems, but should be an integral part of every faculty member’s efforts to become more effective in the classroom.
• Although professional development has often been viewed as supplementary within the academy, it actually plays a central role in faculty motivation and vitality across their careers.
• Without professional development opportunities, faculty are often isolated and unaware of beneficial, innovative pedagogical approaches.
• “One who dares to teach must never cease to learn” (Dana): Professional development provides opportunities for faculty to learn about learning, about teaching, about students, and about themselves.
• Professional development should not be an optional or occasional activity. Regular participation in professional development activities should be an expectation for all teachers.
• Professional development is the conscience of the professional academic. It makes teachers aware of what they do, asks them why, and challenges them to continually do it better.
• Professional development strengthens the affective, intellectual, and social aspects of academic life. It improves the academic experience at institutions for teachers and students.

During these times of very tight budgets, activities central to the success of teachers may be targeted for cuts. Professional development opportunities should not fall into that category, and those committed to teaching should be prepared with a set of reasons why.

Noncontributing Group Members: An Important Distinction

One of the biggest concerns that faculty have about using small groups involves the contributions of individual members and whether some in the group are riding on the contributions of others. These freeloaders, who are mostly known in the literature as “social loafers,” are assumed not to be contributing because they are lazy. Students share this concern about nonproductive group members. They regularly list it as one of the main reasons they don’t like to participate in group work.

Lynne Freeman and Luke Greenacre think we’ve missed an important distinction in our consideration of this problem. Sometimes students don’t contribute in groups because they are struggling with the material. They aren’t lazy and aren’t purposefully jeopardizing the group’s success. Instead, they aren’t up to speed with the content or the task they’ve been assigned by the group.

Freeman and Greenacre found that this distinction has not been well addressed in the literature. More disturbing, their research revealed that students in groups do not differentiate reasons when a member is not contributing. That is a concern because students in the groups Freeman and Greenacre observed negatively pressured those students they perceived to be loafing. The groups assigned those students tasks they weren’t well-suited to complete, neglected to send them important email messages, scheduled meetings at times they couldn’t attend, set impossible deadlines for them, and withdrew peer support.

Members of groups who are taking advantage of the work done by others in the group should get clear messages that their lack of involvement is inappropriate. However, if a student who is struggling with the material or task gets the same kind of treatment by the group, that

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Using a Capstone Course to Assess Learning

“In this article, we describe an easily adoptable and adaptable model for a one-credit capstone course that we designed to assess goals at the programmatic and institutional levels.” (p. 523)

That’s what the authors claim in the article referenced below, and that’s what they deliver. The capstone course they write about is the culmination of a degree in political science at a public university.

The course is designed to assess the acquisition of three skills—critical thinking, written communication, and oral communication—across the 10 courses that make up the political science major. The course also aspires to “expose students to a holistic review of political science as a discipline, reviewing the broader themes that link the various subfields together; and allow students to reflect on their experience in the major and consider future applications of the major’s themes and skills to a variety of civic and professional contexts.” (p. 524)

A variety of innovative assignments are used to accomplish these goals. The primary activity is a simulated academic conference. Students select a paper they have written for one of their political science courses and prepare it for presentation in this course. The instructor organizes the papers into panels that are presented during four of the eight weeks of the course. The instructor chairs these panels and facilitates a wide-ranging discussion of the papers. The goal of the discussion is to raise questions that pertain to central issues within the field such as power, citizenship, accountability, and legitimacy. The papers are also used to assess critical thinking and writing skills. Each paper is assessed by the instructor and two randomly selected students. All three reviewers use a detailed rubric contained in the article. The instructor uses another rubric (also contained in the article) to assess the oral communication skills displayed in this presentation and in the learning-through-teaching activity described below.

Three other activities contribute more assessment data. In a course mapping exercise students rate each of the 10 major courses in terms of how well they enhanced the four key learning goals expressed in the departmental mission statement: critical thinking, written and oral communication, and understanding the discipline. Students also complete an open-ended exit survey “that asks them to anonymously and candidly evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the program and faculty, and to make recommendations for future development.” (p. 525)

Finally, students complete a learning-through-teaching activity. For this activity, a pair of students makes a 30-minute presentation and facilitates a discussion of it with groups of about 10 beginning students enrolled in a large 100-level American government course. Students may do the presentation on a topic of their choosing, but it must contain substantive content and engage students in discussion.

Besides describing the course design, the authors also share the assessment results produced and in doing so demonstrate what valuable assessment data a course like this can produce. For example, when assessing students’ critical thinking, writing and oral communication skills, the communication skills were consistently lower than departmental expectations. In reviewing course mapping data, they discovered that students perceived only two of their major courses as enhancing their communication skills.

The authors write candidly: “The results from assessment through the capstone have illuminated both programmatic strengths and weaknesses. Maintaining the status quo on strengths is an easy task. However, taking action to address the weaknesses is a more significant undertaking.” (p. 527)

To redress the oral communication deficiency, faculty members agreed to include more oral exercises in their courses, although content and class size make this difficult. It was this feedback that encouraged the development and implementation of the learning-through-teaching activity in the capstone. Departmental faculty also decided to piggyback onto a recent university general education requirement for a public speaking course.

The article discusses the importance of student buy-in to the goals and objectives of a capstone course like this. Their commitment to and involvement in these activities are essential parts of making a course like this work. But the instructors also came to realize that these assessment activities directly benefit students. They provide the opportunity to reflect across the breadth of experiences in this particular degree program.

There has been considerable faculty resistance to programmatic assessment. How will the data be collected and how will it be used? Those concerns are legitimate, but an article like this shows that collection of data can be done using viable processes and the data collected can be used to benefit students, faculty, and the program. “Using results generated by the capstone, our department is building a culture of assessment that facilitates across-the-board programmatic enhancement and boosts student learning opportunities.” (p. 528) As the authors note in the opening quote, this is an adaptable and adoptable course design model—and, we would add, not just for political science degree programs.

Ways to Achieve Student Engagement

Student engagement is another of those buzz phrases popular in higher education. When asked for definitions, either we are hard pressed to come up one or what’s offered is a decidedly different collection of definitions. Here’s an article that includes clear definitions and, based on a creative synthesis of research, offers 10 ways to promote student engagement.

The authors propose definitions broad enough to include more specific descriptions. For example: engagement is “students’ cognitive investment in, active participation in, and emotional commitment to their learning.” (p. 168) Or, engagement is “students’ involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning.” (p. 168)

Based on this synthesis of research, student engagement can be promoted by teachers and institutions in the following ways:

Enhance students’ self-belief—There is no agreement in the research literature as to what motivates learners to engage, but the dominant view is that students engage when they act as their own learning agents working to achieve goals meaningful to them. This means that what students believe about themselves as learners is very important. They must believe they can learn. Giving students some control over learning processes helps develop this confidence and commitment to learning.

Enable students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with others, and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives—“When institutions provide opportunities for students to learn both autonomously and with others, and to develop their sense of competence, students are more likely to be motivated, to engage and succeed.” (p. 170) The focus here is on cultivating intrinsic motivation, which fosters the self-determination that leads to engagement.

Recognize that teaching and teachers are central to engagement—Much research places teachers at the heart of engagement. For example, one study found that “if the teacher is perceived to be approachable, well prepared, and sensitive to student needs, students are committed to work harder, get more out of the session, and are more willing to express their opinion.” (p. 170)

Create learning that is active, collaborative, and fosters learning relationships—“Findings acknowledge that active learning in groups, peer relationships, and social skills are important in engaging learners.” (p. 171)

Create educational experiences for students that are challenging and enriching and that extend their academic abilities—Easy learning activities and assignments are not as effective at engaging students as activities and assignments that challenge them. When students are reflecting, questioning, conjecturing, evaluating, and making connections between ideas, they are engaged.

Ensure that institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds—To become engaged, students must feel they are accepted and affirmed.

Invest in a variety of support services—Sometimes it seems as though students don’t take advantage of support services like learning and advising centers, but a wide variety of research findings confirms the importance of these support services. They are perceived as part of the institutional culture, and students engage when that culture values and supports their efforts to learn.

Adapt to changing student expectations—An institution should never be satisfied with how it is promoting student engagement. As students change and new research evidence emerges, institutional practices should be adjusted. Engagement cannot just be promoted, it must also be maintained.

Enable students to become active citizens—“What is needed is a democratic-critical conception of engagement that goes beyond strategies, techniques, behaviors, a conception in which engagement is participatory, dialogic and leads not only to academic achievement but to success as an active citizen.” (p. 173)

Enable students to develop their social and cultural capital—This kind of capital derives from a sense of belonging, from active relationships with others, and from knowing how things work around the institution. It is especially essential for minority students.


Noncontributing
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can be especially damaging to that student and ultimately to the group.

Freeman and Greenacre recommend “educating” students about this issue. They write that it is “critical” that students understand “that a group member who may be struggling initially can be a highly meaningful contributor when his or her particular skill set develops and/or becomes more critical later in the project.” (p. 14) They also suggest that when groups are deciding on roles and assigning tasks, they consider the skill set needed to successfully complete each and then make assignments based on who can best do what. And finally, they acknowledge that groups may still not be able to handle noncontributing members differentially and constructively, and in those cases teachers should be prepared to intervene. That intervention should focus on problematic behaviors, not necessarily individuals, and the discussion should revolve around what is needed to benefit the group as a whole.