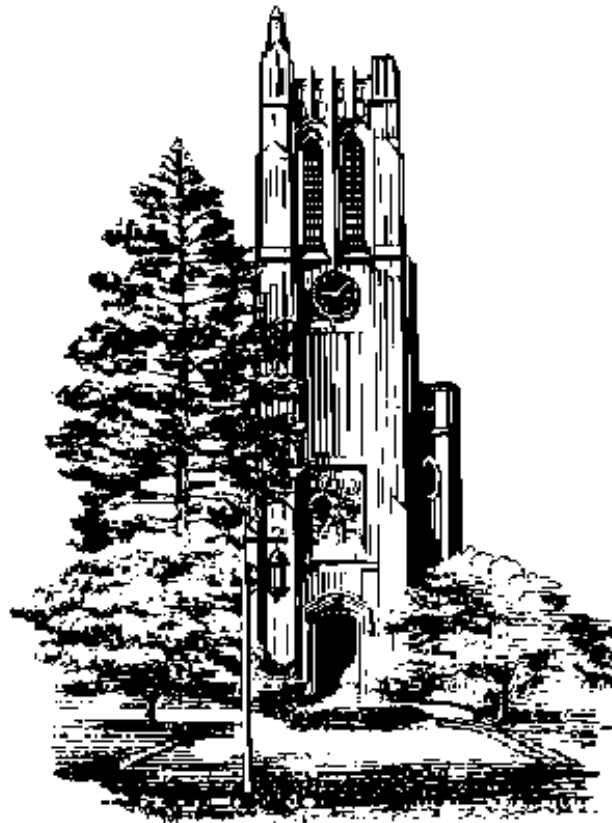


MICHIGAN STATE --- UNIVERSITY



MSU TEACHING THOUGHTS

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MSU Teaching Thoughts 2009/2010

Welcome to the TA Program's MSU Teaching Thoughts, short articles originally published from 2002 to 2005 and now compiled, re-edited (and with new chapters) for your use. Each MSU Teaching Thought introduces readers to important authors and their ideas about teaching and learning in higher education, concepts I've recently come across in my own work, and/or ideas I have explored with my colleagues. Some of these pieces are philosophical in nature; others focus on important practical tips and strategies to help you deal with daily issues as they come about in your teaching. I hope these pieces serve both as a quick reference guide of seminal topics and as a means to further your own reflections on teaching and learning issues. Every Thought will have at least one practical suggestion you can put to use immediately. I also have included a short bibliography of relevant works at the end of each piece. Teaching Thoughts is a great supplement to the *MSU TA Handbook* (A .pdf resides on our web site, <http://tap.msu.edu>). E-mail me at kmj@msu.edu with any comments you have about these articles, or about teaching in general and I will include them in future Thoughts. Contributions from MSU TAs are welcome! Your insights and experiences can impact significantly your peers' teaching development.

Warm Regards,

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¹ By Randy Hicks, 2003.



MSU Teaching Thoughts #1 **Finding Your “Teaching Heart” – Parker Palmer**

(This is our inaugural MSU Teaching Thought so I have decided to focus on one of the most eloquent spokesmen for our craft, Parker Palmer, and in particular how his philosophy of teaching can spur us on to ask questions about who we are within our practice.)

"I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illuminated by the lightning - life of the mind – then teaching is the finest work I know."

(From “The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching ”by Parker J. Palmer)

When have you experienced this kind of joy in your teaching? Do you dream of these kinds of moments? How can we create a class atmosphere in which these kinds of realizations occur? Teach long enough and these moments are bound to happen for you. It is my heartfelt wish that you experience them.

But maybe we are more familiar with the next scenario Palmer describes, also in “The Heart of a Teacher.”

". . . At other moments, the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused -- and I am so powerless to do anything about it -- that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent sham. Then the enemy is everywhere; in those students from some alien planet, in that subject that I thought I knew, and in the personal pathology that keeps me earning my living this way. What a fool I was to imagine that I had mastered this occult art -- harder to divine than tea leaves and impossible for mortals to do even passably."

In The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscapes of a Teacher's Life, Palmer writes that we struggle with three interwoven teaching complexities. Two of these we work hard to recognize and conquer:

1. The subjects we teach are as large and complex as life, so our knowledge of them is always flawed and partial.
2. The students we teach are even larger and more complex. "To see them more clearly and see them as a whole, and to respond to them wisely in the moment, requires a fusion of Solomon and Freud that few of us achieve."

Palmer claims we rarely recognize and address the third:

3. Knowing who we are and becoming more aware of our own identity and integrity. Parker claims, "Knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject."

But how do we get to know ourselves as teachers?

Palmer describes three paths: the intellectual, the emotional, and the spiritual. "Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on each other for wholeness," Palmer claims. "Reduce teaching to intellect and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual and it loses its anchor in the world." A balance between thinking, feeling, and fulfilling our "heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life," constitutes the wholeness of which Palmer speaks. Good teaching is not simply a technical exercise. Good teaching stems from the identity and integrity of the teacher and in his or her ability to connect with students and to connect them to the subject.

Palmer's first "scenario", described at the beginning of this piece, reveals the power of the "shared moment;" one in which teacher becomes student and students peers, all working to achieve a goal of greater understanding of their subject within a real world context. What about the second scenario? What happens when there is no connectedness, no sharing, and no "wholeness?"

In my teaching philosophy, no matter how often it changes, I come back to one seminal point about my teaching and about my role as a teacher: By sharing with students my own heartfelt commitment to my subject, I believe I can provoke others into creating meaningful historical self-understandings of their own. I believe good teachers not only expose students to the content and knowledge of their discipline, they expose themselves as human beings -- their passions, their fears, their failures. It's that exposure Palmer believes is the hardest to achieve because we, as teachers, rarely reflect on our roles in this context, nor do we have the courage to be honestly and imperfectly human in front of our students.

What is your identity as a teacher within your discipline? How do you communicate that identity to your students with believable integrity?

Think back to your own best teaching/learning experiences. What happened? I'll wager, that to some extent, you and your students shared in a meaningful realization, one that both left you and them safely vulnerable AND stronger at the same moment.

There are varieties of ways to create that realization. You will find your own. Ironically, most of the time you won't be able to predict when it's going to happen. Nevertheless, by considering the tripartite wholeness that Palmer describes, you will increase your chances of experiencing what sharing with your students can be. Give yourself time. A search for the kind of discovery Palmer describes is a lifelong venture.

Teaching Tips:

1. Consider why you are a philosopher/scientist/mathematician/ etc. then explain to your students why what you do is important to you.
2. Go beyond explaining why something is important to the discipline. Let your students know why or how it is meaningful to you.

Resources:

Faculty and TA Development. Writing a teaching philosophy. The Ohio State University http://ucat.osu.edu/teaching_portfolio/teaching_port.html.

Johnston, Kevin M. "Creating a Teaching Philosophy You Can Use." Invited Speaker, Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) Conference, San Diego, CA, April 5, 2008. <http://tap.msu.edu/faseb2008/teachingphilosophydevelopment/> (Site contains step-by-step direction and detailed bibliography)

Livsey, Rachel C. (In Collaboration with Parker Palmer). (1999). *The courage to teach: A guide for reflection and renewal*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Palmer, Parker J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscapes of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

_____. (1993). *To know as we are known: Education as a spiritual journey*. San Francisco: Harper.

Van Note Chism, Nancy. (1998). Developing a philosophy of teaching statement. *Essays on Teaching Excellence. Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education* 9 (3).



MSU Teaching Thoughts #2

Taking Risks in the Classroom

“Teaching is mostly listening. Learning is mostly talking.”

- Dr. Alice Dreger
Northwestern University

In the inaugural Teaching Tip, I addressed Parker Palmer’s thoughts on identity and integrity in teaching. I mentioned that much of Palmer’s work focuses on finding ways for you to find your “heart” as a teacher. Part of that self-reflective process involves asking yourself, “Who am I as a teacher?” and “How does my teaching *honestly* reflect my passion for my subject, my students, and for learning? For many of us, this kind of introspective journey is risky business. If not for the emotional discomfort these types of searches occasionally promote then because finding even *more* time to consider such large issues seems nearly impossible with day-to-day classroom responsibilities, research demands, and perhaps, home and family concerns.

What constitutes risk-taking in the classroom? As far as teaching is concerned, risk-taking for most teachers implies they are doing at least one of two things:

1. Employing teaching strategies with which they are not familiar.
2. Employing behaviors that in some way break down traditional class structures, hierarchies, etc. in order to promote better student learning.

Committing oneself to doing either of these can lead to more than a little discomfort. Employing both at one time could be disastrous. But learning is not always a comfortable process. Some scholars even believe that learning only occurs when there’s a little pain involved.

During an MSU Seminar on College Teaching, Alice Dreger, formerly a professor in Lyman Briggs and now at Northwestern University, artfully addressed taking risks in the classroom. Pulling from her own experiences as a student, Dr. Dreger remarked that she realized she didn’t necessarily need teachers to teach her, particularly if they went about their business using traditional approaches. That realization led Dreger to this conclusion: In order to be effective in the classroom, a teacher must take risks to breed the kind of student-teacher trust

that promotes effective learning. Some of her recommendations for new TAs in the audience included:

1. Try new teaching approaches and assess their effects immediately. Trust your students' opinions. Share the evaluation process with them. Put their opinions in effect when possible.
2. Be willing to stop an activity (or a class) if it's clear your students are not prepared. You're prepared. Engender in students a feeling that they have a responsibility to you and to each other to be prepared as well.
3. Use creative visual props to engage students in conversation.
4. Be willing to give students space to learn.
5. Realize that you're not going to be "great" most of the time. It's okay to have a bad day.

At the "heart" of Dreger's risk-taking philosophy is the belief that shared success and failures create trust between teachers and students. For some of us, taking a risk means not wearing a tie to work or learning students' names AND calling on them personally to help you make a point to the rest of the class. For others, taking a risk means reconstructing your course to emphasize collaborative learning, trading textbooks for provocative readings, or allowing students to submit exam questions for the final. The point is that if you are taking risks in the classroom you're doing something different from what is *comfortable* for you.

Perhaps you'll choose to try something that turns out to be ineffective, or worse yet, embarrassing (There's nothing like a little shared embarrassment to create a teachable moment.). Or, more than likely, you'll try something different that has your students coming to the next class saying, "Wow! Can we try that again?"

Following are some tips on how you might take risks in the classroom:

Taking Risks With Lecture

Do Not Lecture. Transform a passive-learning experience into one that involves your class by breaking your lecture down into 3-5 seminal points. Organize your class period accordingly into 15-20 minute segments. Following a five-minute introduction to the day's activities, treat each point/segment this way:

Identify a problem/situation related to the main point of the segment.

Give students five minutes to write a quick list of qualities that relate the problem to the main point of the segment.

Take five minutes to solicit responses from your students. Write them on the board.

Five minutes more of your comments on their remarks and on their relationship to the segment's main point.

Three-minute summary and analysis. Set –up of next Segment.

End class with an effective with a 7-10 minute summation of the day's main points, your student's most meaningful comments, and how they all relate to the day's lesson.

Taking Risks With Discussion

Assign groups as soon as possible early in the semester. Use these groups as a means for addressing key points of the day's topic(s). Assign to group participants a role within the group (i.e. scribe, reporter, discussion leader, skeptic, and reflective thinker). Have students stick to their roles when addressing a topic or problem. ROTATE roles regularly. Group reporters responsible for sharing information with the rest of the class. Function as a "traveling facilitator," moving from group to group to assist in the activity.

"Give up the Chalk" regularly. Allow students to facilitate parts of the discussion.

Taking Risks with Assessment/Evaluation

Employ mid-term evaluations. Ask 3-5 questions from which you can get something meaningful. Share results with your students. Make small changes if necessary.

Ask your student in the evaluations what THEY could be doing to make the class more effective.

Ask your students for assistance in making up exam questions. USE the results if they're appropriate.

Resources: Following are resources that in their own way address risk-taking in higher education. The Simon text addresses teaching as a form of political action. O'Reilly in Radical Presence takes a "Palmeresque" look at teaching as a means for spiritual growth. Nilson's work is "risky" for some because "teaching at its best" often involves employing non-traditional methods of lecturing, discussion, class evaluation and assessment. Finally, I included a journal reference to help those interested in reading periodical literature on teaching in higher education. This particular journal often devotes entire editions to one topic, example: #59 "Collaborative Learning," #67 "Active Learning," #51 and #71, "Teaching and Technology."* Finally, the handbook came from a two-day teaching seminar I attended on cooperative learning, surely a risk-taking venture for most of us (cooperative learning, that is.).

Duncan-Hewitt, Wendy & Apple, Dan. (1995). *A handbook on cooperative learning*. 2nd Edition. Corvallis, OR: Pacific Crest Software, Inc.

**New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. The Jossey-Bass Higher Education Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Nilson, Linda B. (2003). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors*, 2nd Ed. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

O'Reilly, Mary Rose. (1998). *Radical presence: Teaching as contemplative practice*.
Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.

Simon, Roger I. (1992). Teaching against the grain: Texts for a pedagogy of possibility. Eds.
Giroux, Henry A. & Paulo Freire. *Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series*.
New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1992.



MSU Teaching Thoughts #3
Dealing With Teacher/Student Conflict and Diversity

“When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multi-cultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve. We can teach in ways that transform consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberatory liberal arts education.”

- bell hooks
Teaching to Transgress (p. 44)

Change can be painful. Intellectual change can be particularly uncomfortable when questions prompt us to confront our own, closely held concepts of who we are as teachers. But to be the kind of “transformative” educators bell hooks describes, at some point we must consider questions that provoke us to see ourselves and our students as something other than “the Other.”

9/11 caused many of us to become more aware of our students. I hope as part of that growing awareness, we also considered diversity more thoughtfully in the college classroom. We know that our students come from a wide range of racial and social class backgrounds, but do we consider often enough that they come to MSU in search of knowledge and skills for a variety of reasons? We want to make our classrooms into diverse communities in which participants exchange ideas and opinions freely. This means that first, some of us must rethink our “sacred” concepts of ourselves as teachers and second, we had better reconsider how we think of our students. If our goal as teachers is to provoke our charges into creating for themselves concepts of the world that more meaningfully explain relational differences, we need to avoid behaviors that cause unnecessary distance between our students and ourselves.

Benjamin Bowser and his colleagues in Confronting Diversity Issues on Campus recommend that teachers do four things to promote better inclusion in the classroom. They are, in abbreviated form:

1. Examine and challenge your own attitudes and beliefs about the purpose of education. How might your students’ motivations for attending MSU be different than your approach to teaching?

2. Develop rhetorical and teaching strategies that relate to your students. Push students in to relating class material to their own experiences. Ask often: Why should you know this?
3. Be open, pay attention to the indirect relational messages that students may be sending you. Sometimes an indication that you care makes all the difference.
4. Assess students' level of preparation for the course early in the semester, preferably at the beginning. Do it routinely throughout. If necessary, make adjustments to the syllabus. As teachers we must address why, when, and how we assess learning.

Dealing with diversity and *really* learning to appreciate meaningfully the relational differences of our students, means that some of us need to break out of our old patterns to appreciate what our students can offer. Doing so will promote the kind of community bell hooks describes: open, honest, perhaps a little painful at times, but safe.

Today's Teaching Tip: Assess your students' interests at the beginning of the semester, before you create the final version of your syllabus. Find a way to include some of those interests in the course. Point out in the syllabus when you are making this "compromise" and why.

Resources: Following are a number of resources addressing diversity in college teaching and the role of multi-culturalism in modern classrooms. I've included hooks and Giovanni because their thoughts concerning diversity's impact on higher education characterize some of the best thinking (and writing) about what modern educators should strive to become.

Adams, Maurianne, Ed. (1992). *Promoting diversity in college classrooms: Innovative responses for the curriculum, faculty, and institutions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Alger, Jonathan R. (January-February, 1997). The educational value of diversity. *Academe*. V. 83, No. 1, 20 – 23.

Bowser, Benjamin, Auletta, Gale S., & Jones, Terry. (1994). *Confronting diversity issues on campus*. Survival Skills for Scholars Series, Ed. Mitchell Allen. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Center for the Integration of Teaching and Learning (CIRTL). Learning through diversity. http://www.cirtl.net/pillars_LtD.html.

Diversity and inclusive teaching. Vanderbilt University. http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching_resources/interactions/diversity.htm

Diversity Web. Association of American Colleges and Universities http://www.diversityweb.org/diversity_innovations/faculty_staff_development/teaching_strategies_practices/index.cfm.

- Butler, Donnel. (2001). *Diversity in the classroom: Links on the web*. Retrieved January 23, 2007 from <http://www.princeton.edu/~djbutler/ditclink.htm>.
- Giovanni, Nikki. (1994). A theory of patience. In *Racism 101*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Halpern, Diane F. and Associates. (1994). *Changing college classrooms: New teaching and learning strategies for an increasingly complex world*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- hooks, bell. (1994) *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Roberts, Helen. *Teaching from a multi-cultural perspective*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1993.
- Rudenstein, Neil L. (April 19, 1996) Why a diverse student body is so important. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. V. 42, No. 32).
- Schoem, David, Frankel, Linda, Zuniga, Ximena, & Lewis, Edith A. Ed. (1993). *Multicultural teaching in the university*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- University of Michigan Diverse Democracy Project. <http://www.umich.edu/~divdemo>.



MSU Teaching Thoughts #4 **Increasing Student Input: Tips for Promoting Good Discussion**

In the last MSU Teaching Thought I addressed an important issue concerning diversity in classroom, namely, that there are things we can do to promote better inclusion in the classroom. Learning to appreciate the relational differences of our students helps us create what bell hooks has claimed is a climate of free expression in which students can experience a “truly liberatory liberal arts education.” (hooks, Teaching to Transgress, 44.)

Not surprisingly, being more aware of and sensitive to students’ educational and cultural backgrounds also aids tremendously in your ability to foster meaningful discussions. Noted teacher-scholar Wilbert McKeachie maintains that one needs to be nimble-footed intellectually to facilitate good discussions. Negotiating conflict, motivating the unprepared, supporting the shy, and toning down the bold, all while keeping things moving in the right direction, requires that instructors be aware of relational issues that are not necessarily as important when lecturing.

Much of this Teaching Thought comes from Chapter 5 in McKeachie’s Teaching Tips, a gem of a work now in its eleventh edition. If there’s one book about college teaching you had to have, my bet is that most of us in the business would recommend this one. After decades of research and writing on college and university teaching, Professor McKeachie remains in great demand. I had the “misfortune” of presenting at a conference in Vancouver opposite one of his sessions. I had to keep an overflowing crowd of faculty interested in McKeachie’s talk from stealing chairs out of my room.

I’ve also added a few considerations based on an enjoyable impromptu meeting I had last week with Rory Kraft, in CIS-IAH. He mentioned that he taught two sections and that they reacted differently to the same material. One section seemed attentive, lively, and fully “plugged in” to what he was trying to do. The other? Well, they sat silently most of the time, rarely initiated discussion, and seemed to not desire to benefit from a free exchange of ideas. Does this sound familiar to any of you?

What follows are lists of recommendations to help guide you in putting together and facilitating a discussion. As with most things, practice makes perfect, and a willingness to take on the unexpected will serve you quite well in this endeavor. Prepare well, trust your students,

and be prepared to be surprised. There are a lot of ways to get a point across. Sometimes your students find the best ones.

(Some) Problems to Teaching by Discussion

1. Class participation
2. Making progress towards course objectives
3. Handling emotional reactions of students

Discussion Stages

Stages:

1. Formulating the problem – Clarifying main issues to be addressed
2. Suggesting Hypotheses – What do we know?
3. Getting Relevant Data – What other issues are relevant?
4. Evaluating Alternative Solutions – What else is possible? How? Why?

Starting/Maintaining Discussion

1. Sharing Common Experience
2. Start with Controversy
3. Use appropriate questions, ones that lead to issues rather than facts. Example: Application and Interpretation Questions, Problem Questions, Connective and Causal Effect Questions, Comparative Questions, Evaluative Questions. (NOTE: Ellen Weber, Houghton College, goes through the following “checklist” of what good questioning entails:
 - a. Working from the known to the unknown.
 - b. Provide clues to generate good answers.
 - c. Using students to add to brief peer responses.
 - d. Vary questioning techniques – include humor.
 - e. Visualize questions with charts, overheads, etc.
 - f. Ask questions before calling on students for answers.
 - g. Avoid jargon.

What about non-participants? Consider the following when you’re seeking solutions to the “quiet” class.

Barriers to Discussion:

- Students’ habits of passivity
- (Students’) Failure to see value of discussion
- Fear of criticism, or looking stupid
- (Teacher’s) rush toward agreement or solution before alternative points of view have been considered (Parentheses mine)

- (Students') feelings that the task is to find the answer the instructor wants rather than to explore and evaluate possibilities.

- (McKeachie, 59. Parentheses mine)

I would add to the above tips,

1. Teach your students how to benefit from discussion. Most of them have been lectured to their whole lives. You will need to teach them to understand the importance of sharing ideas, being receptive to alternative viewpoints, and of showing respect for difference.
2. Summarize main points as you reach them. Be sure to pull the discussion together at the end of the class, emphasizing the main points that you and your students addressed. Evaluate periodically, allowing students to provide input concerning what's working and what's not.
3. Although reading preparation should be an important part of discussion, avoid making reading assignments the sole source of information. Provide thought questions to students to help them prepare for the next day's discussion.
4. Finally, "Enjoy the silence." Students need time to think. Allow them to have it. We generally respond to questions or expect answers from our students in less than three seconds. Give yourself space with silence as well. Let students SEE you work through a problem. Give them confidence that they can "work by thinking" as well.

Resources:

Blount, Jackie M. (1999). Leading classroom discussion. Retrieved December 12, 2002 from http://www.celt.iastate.edu/pdf/Leading_Discussions.pdf .

Brookfield, Stephen D., and Preskill, Stephen. (1999). *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Enhancing discussion. (2001). Center for Excellence in Teaching, SUNY. Retrieved February 27, 2007 from http://www.fitnyc.edu/information/CET/enhanc_online_discus.html .

McKeachie, Wilbert J. (1999.) Facilitating discussion: Posing problems, listening, questioning. In *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 44 - 65.

Weber, Ellen. (1997). *Creative learning from inside out*. Tucson, AZ: Zephyr Press.

Windschitl, Mark. (1999). Using small-group discussions in science lectures. *College Teaching*. Vol. 47(1): 23 – 27.



MSU Teaching Thoughts #5 **Teaching Beyond Content**

Greetings! This MSU Teaching Thought was inspired by my attendance at the annual Professional and Organizational Development (POD) conference, a gathering of some of the top thinkers on teaching and learning issues in higher education. The conference is interesting in that it not only offers participants a great chance to encounter some progressive approaches to teaching in higher education, it also gives members a chance to network with learning resource developers from around the world. This was my second POD conference and I brought back a lot of interesting information. I'll be sharing it with you in subsequent MSU Teaching Thoughts.

I thought I would forward to you a drastically “slimmed -down” version of a piece I'm working on that asks teachers to re-think how it is they set up and teach their courses. In short, I'm asking that we trade content coverage for a more “problem-centered” approach to teaching. My thoughts stem from a sincere interest in post-modernist reflective approaches to teaching and on how to make students better critical thinkers.

I presented another version of this work at POD. I'd like to say that I really made an impact, but I didn't. The response I received was lukewarm at best, for a variety of reasons. I have continued discussion with a colleague at U-Texas on the practicality of some of these issues, particularly when applying this approach to science teaching.

How might you consider provoking better critical thinking in your students by taking this approach? Is this a valid way to think about class organization? I welcome your critique. As always, let me know what you think. I'll pass it on to our other members.

Teaching Beyond Content

Ask faculty what makes their teaching successful and often you will get the response, “[I am successful] when I make something relevant to my students. They seem to enjoy my class more, remember more, and learn more.” Good teachers provoke within their students a more meaningful understanding of course material by thoughtfully placing it within a larger context. By bridging the gap from content to contextual understanding, teachers significantly enhance the possibility that they and their students will experience the beauty of the reflected idea.

So, how did we get to the point where we believe what we have to say is important when most of us organize our classes around content coverage and ends-means rationality? Positivist

norms certainly have had a significant effect on the way we organize, implement, and evaluate our classes. Consequently, we seek a technical-like mastery of our enterprise and subscribe to the idea that good teaching is being able to master a set of techniques and procedures (Schön, 1983. Parker, 1997). We measure our effectiveness quantitatively and go to “Quick Fixes” and formulaic solutions to get a better understanding of teaching and learning issues. We create *content-driven* classes and then are quick to claim that our students are largely passive and that they seek generalizations and understanding only of what gets them through the next assignment.

Teaching at its best evades most attempts at a meaningful quantitative evaluation. Furthermore, our descriptions of our best teaching experiences reveal that students really seek something more than the answer to “What’s going to be on the test?” Accordingly, we should be teaching less content more effectively, pushing students to a greater contextual understanding of important ideas, events, etc., to help them become what Ken Bruffee and Les Adler refer to as “interdependent” citizenry and “whole” people (Bruffee, 1999; Adler, 2001).

Teaching Tip: Cut 20% of the content in your course. Spend more time getting your students to understand the complexities of issues you think BEST reflect the importance of your course. The “trick” to implementing this approach is to avoid falling into the very pitfalls you’re trying to overcome. There’s no patent formula for reducing content in favor of emphasizing context in any course. Considering this approach certainly means letting go of traditional notions of classroom hierarchy, a subject I addressed in the earlier MSU Teaching Thought “Taking Risks.” It also means considering you and your students as valid and potent “texts,” an approach that could substantively de-value course content. Hmm. That’s a pretty “chewy” thought. Maybe the best way to start re-thinking our classrooms is to use a theme-centered approach to organizing our content and emphasize meaning over facts.

Resources:

To join the Professional & Organizational Development listserv:

<http://www.podnetwork.org/listserve.htm>

Adler, Les K. (2001). *Uncommon sense: Liberal education, learning communities, and the transformative quest*. In B. L. Smith and J. McCann, Eds. *Reinventing ourselves: interdisciplinary education, collaborative learning, and experimentation in higher learning*. Bolton, Mass: Anker Publishing.

Bruffee, Kenneth A. (1999). *Collaborative learning in higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Erickson, H. Lynn. (2002). *Concept-based curriculum and instruction: Teaching beyond the facts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Parker, Stuart. (1997). *Reflective teaching in the post modern world: A manifesto for education in post modernity*. Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University Press,



MSU Teaching Thoughts #6
Service Learning: What TAs Should Know

A doctoral student in Sociology recently asked me about service learning. He was applying to a community college and in his application he was asked to provide some explanation of how his work might be applied to arenas beyond the class and conference room. He wanted to know first, what “service learning” was and second, how could he make his academic interests fit the demands of the position? Much as with thinking NOW about teaching (and with writing a teaching philosophy!), dealing with these questions before you start applying for a job will make your interview go that much more smoothly. This is particularly true if you’re applying to community colleges that take their responsibility to community education and service very seriously.

“Service learning” or “community-service learning” represents one part of the academic professional responsibility “triad,” which also includes research and teaching. At one level, service learning simply means getting out in the local community and sharing what you’ve discovered, often to audiences and in contexts you wouldn’t face normally in the classroom. At another level, service learning can be a very powerful force for community improvement and social justice. Note, for example, the role of progressive education at the turn of the twentieth century in alleviating the plight of urban poor.

The idea of making university research somewhat applicable to (and some might say, responsible for) community well-being isn’t new. In fact, universities and academicians both in the U.S. and abroad have offered their resources and talents for various forms of community and national improvement since the Napoleonic Era. You might even consider service learning as old as Christianity, whose notion of PRAXIS, turning learning into something socially practicable, has motivated people to go the aid of others for 2000 years.

How can you fit your academic interests into some notion of service to community? In my friend’s case, that could mean explaining to a concerned neighborhood association the sociological pitfalls of urban decay, or suburban sprawl. He, along with colleagues from other disciplines, might hold a weekend workshop series to address other relevant issues facing local communities: perhaps crime, spousal abuse, environmental issues, etc. Service learning can mean university departments helping to train primary and secondary school teachers. It can mean graduate students participating in “science fairs” for local high school students. Certainly agricultural extension efforts are powerful forms of service learning. They represent, in fact, the basic philosophy upon which schools like MSU were founded.

So, consider how what you do in the lab, or in the classroom, or archive might be relevant to someone other than your colleagues or students. As graduate students, class and research responsibilities limit for many of us our chances to employ what we know and study in a service learning context. On the other hand, certain disciplines like Social Work are built around the idea of service to the community. In any case, thinking about that part of your future responsibility NOW will help you field future questions like the ones my friend faces.

Teaching Tip: Survey your students as to their participation service groups (Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, etc.). How might your course add to their experiences, or vice versa?

Resources:

Jacoby, B., and Associates, Eds. Service – Learning in Higher Education: Concept’s and Practices. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1996.

Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Now in it’s 8th Volume. <http://www.umich.edu/~mjcsl/>.

National Service Learning Clearinghouse. <http://www.servicelearning.org/>.

Saltmarsh, J. (1996). Education for a critical citizenship: John Dewey’s contribution to the pedagogy of community service learning. Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, Vol. 3 (Fall, 1996): pp. 13-21.

Service Learning Program. Portland Community College. <http://www.pcc.edu/resources/service-learning/>

Strand, K. J. Community – based research as pedagogy. Michigan Journal of Community-Service Learning. Vol. 7 (Fall, 2000): pp. 85-96.



MSU Teaching Thoughts #7 **Handling Classroom Conflict**

“I think a little conflict is a good thing, particularly when everyone agrees with me.”
- My father, Mac Johnston, wise sage that he was in a lighter moment.

This afternoon I watched a videotape of a Math TA handing back tests to his students. They had taken their first exam and by in large had done very poorly. The situation might have provided an opportunity for a disgruntled student and a disappointed teacher to come to verbal “blows” over bad test results. What resulted instead, through skillful negotiation on the TA’s part, was a civil and productive conversation between teacher and students about the test, why the students had done poorly, and most importantly, what they could do to improve their performance on future exams.

Sound familiar? What kinds of conflicts have you encountered while teaching? Chances are you could accurately describe the turmoil while it is taking place, but are you sure you could identify what issues started the conflict? What’s your strategy for dealing with conflict? Do you have different approaches to handling different kinds of tensions? When should we confront someone over an issue? When should we leave it alone?

When asked what their primary concerns are about teaching, most TAs rank “Handling Conflict” highly, and many consider it their number one concern. And why not? Conflict by in large is uncomfortable, sometimes dangerous, and often unsuccessfully resolved.

William A. Donohue, MSU Professor of Communications and co-author of Managing Personal Conflict, offers a useful strategy for helping people in all occupations identify and deal with conflict effectively. I’d like to outline in abbreviated form what Donohue and his colleague have artfully depicted as a Conflict Management Flowchart (Donohue, et al. pg. 156 - 165). I hope you can find a formula for your own success in dealing with conflict by following these steps:

Making The Decision to Confront (When?)

- Do you sense a significant problem?
- Is the issue important to you personally?

- Does the other person want something different from what you want?
- Do you think about the problem regularly?
- Are your personal needs threatened by the problem?
- How will the other person respond to your attempts to your efforts to resolve the problem?

Do you want to risk a confrontation now?

- Do you want to preserve or strengthen the relationship with the other person?
- How significant is the issue to you both?
- Can you avoid becoming verbally aggressive during the conflict? Can the other?
- Do you have enough time to deal with the problem?
- Are you safe when dealing with the problem?
- Are you ready to listen?

Timing is crucial. When at all possible, avoid conflict until you and the other person are ready to deal with it properly.

Planning to Confront (What? How?)

Is the potential for crisis under control?

- Can you avoid threatening each other?
- Can you avoid challenging each other's personal needs?
- Does the other person know the confrontation is coming?
- Do parties have time to prepare?

Can you relieve the crisis?

- Receive each other's comments without interrupting – don't get defensive.
- Repeat the other person's comments as objectively as possible – show respect.
- Request the other's proposed ways of dealing with the problem.
- Review options and decide on the best approach.

Once parties engage in destructive conflict, the situation is probably out of control and continued confrontation will result in more harm than good.

Can you identify essential substantive issues?

- Can you begin the conflict by setting the stage for productive problem solving?
- Can you separate emotional and relational issues from the data, interest, and value issues?
- Can you create multiple viable options for managing the conflict?
- How patient can you be?
- Is power balanced between the parties?
- Does each party have equal ability and willingness to impact each other's decisions?
- Does each party know that they are not required to "give in."?
- Are both parties about equal in their communication skills?
- Do both parties feel safe when negotiating with the other?

Work to restore power imbalances. Both parties need to act together to successfully resolve a conflict. No one acts independently.

Can you create a collaborative negotiation context?

- Are your goals clear in your mind?
- Is negotiation the best way to handle the dispute?
- Can you freely exchange information with other person?
- Can you be flexible about your methods, but firm in your resolution?

Attack only the issues, not the other person. Select a third party if necessary. Be as specific as you can be.

“When involved in conflict,” Donohue advises, “Control it. Don’t get stupid.” (Donohue, et al. P. 154) Conflict can be terrifying, but it can also produce powerful opportunities for learning. Accurately identifying the source of your concerns or those of your students and taking the steps outlined above to ameliorate difficult tensions in the classroom will save you grief and turn a potentially ugly situation into something positive.

In closing, I am happy to say that the TA in the video was our own Rajesh L’al, who was a specialist in mathematics education at MSU and one of the best teachers on campus. He also participated in workshops through the TA Program, helping others benefit from his expertise.

Teaching Tip: Use your syllabus as a means for avoiding potential conflict. You are already clear about assignments, dates, breaks, right? Add a section about student conduct policies. Take them right out of MSU Spartan Life. How should they treat you? One another? Be as explicit as possible. Should your class sign a “conduct contract?”

Resources:

Boice, R. (1996). Classroom incivilities. *Research in Higher Education*, 37, 453-486.

Conflict Resolution Web Site: <http://www.crinfo.org>.

Donohue, William A., & Kolt, Robert. (1992). *Managing interpersonal conflict*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Fisher, Roger, Ury, William, & Patton, Bruce. (1991). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving In. 2nd Edition*. New York: Penguin Books.

Handling classroom conflict. (2004). Retrieved January 25th, 2004, from <http://cfe.unc.edu/pdfs/FYC22.pdf>. . University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Kearney, P., & Plax, T. (1992). *Power in the classroom*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Meyers, S. A. (2003). Strategies to prevent and reduce conflict in college classrooms. *College Teaching* 51, 3, pp. 94-98.

MSU Spartan Life Website: <http://www.vps.msu.edu/SpLife/default.pdf> .



MSU Teaching Thoughts #8
Writing to Learn: Learning To Write

Think of the BEST writing experience you've had. Now, think of the WORST. What makes them that way? What are your motivations for writing? Professional? Personal? Functional? Poetic? Finally, What makes your writing GREAT? Or, what makes you wad that paper up and toss it, burn it, or swallow it?

Cathy Fleck and David Medei, consultants from MSU's Writing Center, pose many of these questions to workshop attendees at "Writing To Learn: Learning To Write," a workshop designed to get us thinking AND practicing using writing as a tool for promoting better student learning. Through individual, small-group, and large-group work, Cathy and David do an excellent job of both describing techniques we can use in the classroom and MODELING the technique they advocated (No mean feat!). Participants have a chance to reflect on the questions above and then, in successive stages, write down and share their responses with other graduate students.

In essence, Fleck and Medei guide us through a writing exercise that, at least in form, we can adapt for our own students' use. Cathy and David's method asks us to describe in as much detail as we can a significant experience we have had with writing. We then consider WHY We're writing, TO WHOM, and under WHAT conditions? Individual FREE WRITING allows us to get our thoughts down. SMALL-GROUP discussion helps us to compile elements of our free-written statements. Most groups share remarkable commonalities, even using the same vocabulary to describe BEST or WORST writing experiences. Sharing small group findings with the ENTIRE GROUP reveals various concrete opinions about writing experiences. Interestingly, what emerges in large-group discussion is an "organic" collection of ideas, sub-groups, opinions, and hypotheses that we can integrate, re-configure, expand or reshuffle according to our needs.

Although participants in this workshop answer variously to questions Cathy and David pose, all agree that writing can be tough. It's personal, even when we write professionally (Maybe especially when we write professionally). And because it's personal, it leaves us

vulnerable, no matter the context. Keep that in mind when you craft your own writing exercises for you students.

What follows is a list of the stages suggested by Cathy and David’s workshop. This comes from an informative handout they provide participants. I’ve reworded a few statements for brevity, but for the most part, these are some of the key the ways Cathy and David believe writing can be used to enhance student learning:

1. Writing to **(Re)COLLECT** Information
 - aids in student learning preparation
 - lays the groundwork for possible critical learning
2. Writing to **EXPLORE** Information
 - enables students to form ideas
 - invites students to name and re-name ideas
 - enables students to form concepts and articulate them
 - encourages students to form and ask questions
 - invites student speculation
 - allows students to identify confusions, uncertainties, and areas for further inquiry
3. Writing to **ANALYZE** Information
 - Enables students to identify sub-topics and form categories for a better understanding of the subject being studied
 - Enables students to identify project parameters
 - Enables students to form hypotheses about the subject matter
4. Writing to **SYNTHESIZE** Information
 - Enables students to shape developing ideas into logical claims, evidence, and arguments
5. Writing to **COMMUNICATE** Information
 - Provides students occasion to compose their thoughts and knowledge of the subject being studied in appropriate genres (i.e., audience, situations, purpose)

KEY POINT: For the most part, we ask students to go to step five without any “in-between” writing exercises.

(NOTE: This information was derived from a larger/longer workshop, “From Experience to Exposition: A Workshop in Genres of Learning and Expression,” By Patricia Lambert Stock, Professor of English, MSU, and former Director of the Writing Center.)

Teaching Tip: Change your essay assignments to reflect this development. Instead of considering the “finished product” alone for a grade, evaluate instead students’ ability to get started on these different aspects of writing.

Resources:

Fulwiler, T. and A. Young (Eds.). (1990). *Programs that work: Models and methods for writing across the curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Hawisher, G. and C. Moran. (2004). Responding to writing on line. In Mary Deane Sorcinelli and Peter Elbow, *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning Series, No. 69*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 115- 125.

Herrington, A. and C. Moran (Eds.). (1992). *Writing, teaching and learning across disciplines*. New York: Modern Language Association.

Meier, John, & Rishel, Tom. (1998). Writing in the teaching and learning of mathematics. Retrieved from <http://www.maa.org/reviews/writing.html>.

MSU Writing Center. <http://writing.msu.edu/>.

Sorcinelli, Mary Deane and Peter Elbow. (Eds.). (1997). Writing to learn: Strategies for assigning writing across disciplines. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning Series, No. 69*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.



MSU Teaching Thoughts #9
Resolving Graduate Student/Faculty Conflicts:
Establishing Good Relationships with Faculty

(The following comes from an effective MSU Program, “Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts Between Graduate Students and Faculty” directed by Karen Klomparens, Dean of the Graduate School, and Professor John Beck, Labor & Industrial Relations. Also involved in putting on program workshops is Professor Tony Nunez, Zoology, Psychology, and Associate Dean of the Graduate School, and Julie Brockman, Asst. Professor of Labor & Industrial Relations.)

In MSU Teaching Thought #7 we covered issues having to do with handling classroom conflict. I used MSU Communications Professor William Donohue’s Conflict Management Flowchart (Donohue, Kolt, 156-165) as a means for describing potential strategies you could employ to ensure your own success when dealing with conflict between you and your students. In short, Donohue emphasizes timing, recognition of power imbalances, objectivity, fairness and argumentative specificity as key components for dealing with conflict successfully. I think we all agree that classroom conflict can be an irritating, if not a powerfully upsetting occurrence. On the other hand, conflict negotiation and resolution can provide great chances for creating those all elusive but powerful “teachable moments.”

In a future “Teaching Thought” we’ll deal with issues surrounding questions concerning whether student incivility is on the rise, but here I’d like to take a slightly different approach to dealing with conflict, one that focuses on another critical professional relationship: graduate students and their (your) faculty.

MSU Professors Karen Klomparens and John Beck offer great advice for fostering productive relationships with your departmental faculty, whether they are directly involved in your degree work or not. The following recommendations come from their FIPSE-funded conflict resolution program, one in which they seek in part to find ways to increase Ph. D. student retention (No small problem as only 50% of students entering their doctoral programs attain their degrees after ten years.)

1. **Maintain honesty and openness in all your relationships with faculty, whether formal (in the context of your education) or informal (in which you, peers, and other faculty work as collaborators).** Klomparens and Beck advise strongly “never letting ‘underground conflict’ take root.”
2. **Be aware of the various roles your faculty play.** More than likely they advise several other students, must maintain their own professional production, negotiate

departmental committee work, and campus, local, or regional commitments. Coming to grips with this fact also can serve as a valuable professional development tool for you, helping you to understand the roles you are also bound to play in your professional life.

3. **Involve yourself in departmental student activities: research teams, workshops, and social events.** They are also a great way to learn about professional norms. Isolation can take even the best students out of the game.
4. **Your relationship with your faculty is unique and a product of personality, professional interests, to some degree life interests, and organizational demands.** Your peers may relate differently to their departments and faculty.
5. **Set relational foundations for future success.** Your faculty will always in some part be responsible for evaluation, often long after you've graduated.
6. **Negotiate conflict according to what Klomparens and Beck identify as "Interests," not "Positions."** Interest-based negotiations greatly enhance the possibility for positive resolution. "What?" in this case is a better consideration than "Who?"
7. **Learn to identify what type of conflict with which you are dealing will help you to decide what, if anything, you need to do about it.** The authors identify 4 types of conflict: Good Conflict, Minor and self-correcting, Underground (leaving concerns unvoiced), and Explosive. The latter may need to involve other parties (Ombudsman, Graduate School staff).

Teaching Tip: Please visit the graduate school website for more information about this exciting new program for more about graduate students and faculty focusing on developing effective communication and interest-based negotiation skills. <http://35.9.50.10/conflictresolution/>

Resources:

Bowen, W. G. and Rudenstine, N. L. (1992). *In pursuit of the PhD*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Conflict Resolution Website: <http://www.crinfor.org> .

Donohue, William A., and Kolt, Robert. (1992). *Managing interpersonal conflict*. Newbury Park: CA: Sage Publications.

Fisher, R. and Ury, W. (1991). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. New York: Penguin Books.

Green, S. G. (1991). Professional entry and the advisor relationship: Socialization, commitment and productivity." *Group and Organization Studies* 16 (4): 387-407.

Holton, S. A. (1995). Conflict management in higher education. *New Directions for Higher Education, Vol. 92*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.

Klomprens, Karen, and Beck, John. (2000). Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts between Graduate Students and Faculty: Learning Effective Strategies to Resolve Conflicts and Also to Prevent Them from Occurring. Workshop Supplement. Also available on line at the above address.

MSU Ombudsman's Office – 353-8830



MSU teaching Thoughts #10

What Undergraduates Say are the Most Irritating Faculty Behaviors

Okay! We're pretty clear about what makes for irritating student behaviors, right? Late arrivals, class work/homework undone, no reading, food, cell phones, newspapers, and silence (?!), among other things comprise a set of behaviors that faculty in several surveys have mentioned were students most irritating behaviors. What do you think your students say irritates them most about faculty behavior? Have you ever asked them?

This short MSU Teaching Thought contains views culled from about 50 surveys in which students (mostly freshman and sophomores) commented on what they thought was the most irritating faculty behavior. Ask your students what they think. See if they match any of these. (Except when I have noted, these are in no particular order. When starred, "*", indicates more than 20% mentioned this as a trait.)

According to the surveys, irritating faculty/TAs

1. Show up late for class. *
2. Are unprepared to teach that day.
3. Seem unorganized.
4. Ask too many personal questions.
5. Inadequately explain difficult problems or concepts.
6. Don't control the class.
7. Don't show up for office hours. *
8. Make students feel stupid ("Put down," "Inferior" "Dumb" "Lack of respect"). *
9. Assign busy work.
10. Write on the board but block the information. (Also, talk to the board). *
11. (TAs) act like they know more than the faculty.
12. Lecture too quickly.
13. Don't talk loud enough or in a monotone.
14. Don't get to know students. *
15. Teach directly from outlines/notes.
16. Start classes early and end it late.
17. Assign work that is never graded.
18. Don't prepare students well for exams.
19. Require on-line readings of more than 20 pages (printing is costly).
20. Don't respond to e-mails.

21. Don't understand you have work from other classes.
22. Don't follow the syllabus. *
23. Allow the class to get behind then "speed up" the last few weeks of class.
24. Writes on the board (or overheads) in very small handwriting.
25. Assume students know more than they do.

Teaching Tip: Do you do things that might irritate your students? Can you become self-aware enough as a teaching to spot some of your own irritating behaviors? Consider holding yourself to standards you've requested of your students.

Resources:

Bowman, Craig. Some humor about student evaluations. Retrieved February 23 from <http://www.bus.lsu.edu/accounting/faculty/lcrumbley/humor.html>.

Fehlauer, Brian. *Understanding student assessment*. Retrieved February 23 from <http://www.educ.uvic.ca/EPLSnew/faculty/storey/Fehlauer.htm> .

Hobson, Suzanne M, & Talbot, Donna M. (2001). Understanding student evaluations. Chapter in *College Teaching*. Retrieved December 2005 from <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-71188224.html> (See also multiple listings at this site for understanding student evaluations.)

Making sense of student evaluation feedback. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching_resources/reflecting/evaluations.htm .

Nuhfer, Ed. (2003). *Of what value are student evaluations?* Retrieved February 24th from <http://www.isu.edu/ctl/facultydev/extras/student-evals.html>.



MSU Teaching Thoughts #11 **Teaching Labs More Effectively**

Orientation evaluations contain a wealth of information concerning participants' ideas about teaching, including what TAs consider are the proper teaching techniques for different classroom contexts. Invariably I get a group of respondents claiming in their post-orientation evaluations that my orientation program was too much focused on science and laboratory instruction OR, that it was too focused on lecture or discussion presentation. More often than not, I get these comments from TAs who attended the same sessions at the same time!

That irony aside, I think orientation evaluations reflect what seems to be a generally shared (and genuine!) belief among TAs that teaching in a lab is very different than teaching a recitation section or lecture. I've puzzled over this dichotomy for a while, believing as does Stephen Yelon and Robert Boice that no matter the setting, there are core teaching values and practices teachers should employ with their students (See Powerful Principles and Boice's First-Order Principles). Moreover, in my teaching consultations with Lab instructors, I invariably lead them consider many of the same issues of organization, presentation, and evaluation that I discuss with lecturers or recitation (discussion) leaders. Defining the day's activities and goals clearly (And making sure students know how those two things relate!), offering positive encouragement and supervision, and providing periodic meaningful feedback to students about their efforts makes for a potentially wonderful class, regardless of what you teach or where. In fact nearly all of the main points in the popular Science Teaching Reconsidered, a short handbook loaded with great tips on how to conduct laboratories, rest upon a foundation of basic teaching principles.

Nevertheless, if there is an outstanding difference in teaching and learning in a lab, it may center on class procedure, or on how the students engage the day's activities and one another in solving a specific set of problems. Students more often than not work in groups while in labs. That, and the process of finding the correct solutions to lab experiments (or practical problem sets) may promote (provoke?) student learning differently. Science teachers in effect are teaching students TWO things of arguably equal importance: the importance of finding the correct solution to a problem, AND the importance of understand the correct process of finding that solution. Perhaps even more than in recitation or lectures, lab students are expected to have acquired a specific set of skills and knowledge that someone graduating from the course would be expected to have acquired (Cannon & Newble, p. 107).

So, what makes for great Lab instruction? Not only an awareness of the basics of presenting, but also a greater understanding of how group work fits within a larger context. Good lab instructors are both great teachers AND great managers. They get their students to

understand the importance of the day's activities by first clearly explaining the significance of the activity. Good Lab instructors are always seeking to make experiments and practical problems relevant. In fact, some of the best lab instructors turn their experiments into practical problem-solving exercises (MSU's Randy Hicks, who finished a Ph.D. in Chemistry, has developed a very interesting Lab exercise using just this approach). Good lab instructors spend time early in the semester preparing their students to work in groups. They assign them to work within specified roles, to use one another to reach solutions, to, in effect "jigsaw" results by using different lab groups to provide different pieces of the solution "puzzle." Good instructors offer just enough help, forcing students to solve problems on their own. Finally, great lab instructors have eyes in the back of their head and are always alert for potential problems. They ALWAYS address safety issues before turning students loose on experiments, no matter how benign the exercise may seem. Shared effort, students' movement around the class, and one moment's inattention can make filling a glass with water a potentially hazardous enterprise.

We will deal with more on this topic in future Teaching Thoughts when our discussion turns to how most effectively to use textbooks and lab manuals to promote student learning. Consult a few of the sources below for a good understanding of what makes for effective presenting.

Teaching Tip: Create Labs that address "real life" issues. On the other hand, if your curriculum is set and tightly controlled, find ways to bring in relevant contemporary information into your discussion of Lab exercises.

Resources:

(An "*" identifies a particularly good resource(s) for today's topic.)

Boice, Robert. (1996). *First-order principles for college teachers: Ten basic ways to improve the teaching process*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

*Cannon, Robert, and Newble, David. (2000). Teaching practical and laboratory classes. In *A handbook for teachers in universities and colleges: A guide to improving teaching methods*. 4th Edition. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, Inc., 104-118.

Committee on Undergraduate Science Education. (1997). *Science teaching reconsidered: A handbook*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Hazel, E., and Baillie, C. *Improving teaching and learning in laboratories*. (1998). Jamieson, Australia: HERDSA Publications.

Matthews, Michael R., Ed. (1991). *History, philosophy, and science teaching: Selected readings*. New York: Teachers College Press.

*McKeachie, Wilbert J. (1986). Laboratory teaching. In *Teaching tips: A guidebook for the beginning college teacher (8th Edition)*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 167-169.

Paulson, Donald R. (August 1999). Active learning and cooperative learning in the organic chemistry lecture class. *Journal of Chemical Education* Vol. 76, 8: 1136-1140.

Samberg, Tris, Wiegand, Deborah, and Selfe, Sarah. (1993). Course specific resource manual for chemistry laboratory courses. In *The TA Experience: Preparing for Multiple Roles: Selected Readings from the 3rd National Conference on the Training and Employment of Graduate Teaching Assistants*. Karron G. Lewis, Ed. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press, 232-239.

Yelon, Stephen L. Powerful Principles of Instruction. (1996). White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers,



MSU teaching Thoughts #12
**Teaching Principles as a Part of Teaching Practice:
Worthwhile or Not?**

“What are the purposes of and priorities of teaching? . . . First, to inspire. Second, to challenge. Third, and only third, to impart information.”

- J. Michael Bishop

“What all great teachers appear to have in common is love of their subject, an obvious satisfaction in arousing this love in their students, and an ability to convince them that what they are being taught is deadly serious.”

- Joseph Epstein

If you'll notice, neither of these two eloquent statements about the nature of teaching describes a particular kind of teaching practice. Working as I do in a business seemingly dominated by “How-To?” instruction and “Teaching Tips” recommendations, I enjoy periodically coming back to conversations and writing about the foundations of teaching practice, the philosophical “Why’s?” or the Principles, if you will, of issues related to good instruction.

At heart, what is the basis for your approach to teaching? What makes for good instruction, beyond technique? How do we know that what we think is important to consider about teaching development *really* makes us more effective teachers? Does something have to be empirically derived to be valid? I hope the following description of a conversation in which I participated helps you to find your own answers to these questions.

Kathleen McKinney, Sociology Professor and Director for Illinois State University’s Center for the Advancement of Teaching, posed a question on the POD list serve (See below for a citation) about a project she initiated on ISU’s campus. In an attempt to get her faculty to do some simple reflection about their teaching, Dr. McKinney had asked her colleagues if they thought that considering basic principles as a foundation for effective teaching and learning was meaningful.

She received an interesting array of responses from her faculty. Some replied, “Thanks!” and others requested a few of the Principle lists I’ve cited below. Kathleen also mentioned that a few of her colleagues responded that the concept of “principles” was “worthless,” in part because they were not empirically derived and because the definitions of specific terms or variables were ambiguous. These faculty represented a classic case of evaluations being more a reflection of the person offering them than the actual case, as there is a tremendous amount of scholarship underpinning the development of principles-based instruction. I encourage you to read in particular Chickering and Gamson’s original 1987 AAHE report and subsequent edited work in the *New Direction for Teaching and Learning Series*.

Read the following popular lists of instructional principles. What do you think about their verifiability? Their applicability? Their relevance to your own teaching practice?

Robert Boice’s Ten First Order Principles

Moderate Classroom Incivilities with Pro-social Immediacies
Wait
Begin before Feeling Ready
Work and Teach in Brief, Regular Sessions
Stop
Moderate Over attachment to Content and Overreaction to Criticism
Moderate Negative Thinking and Strong emotions
Let Others Do Some of the Work
Welcome Learning and Change
Build Resilience by Limiting Wasted Efforts

Stephen Yelon’s Powerful Principles of Instruction

Help Students make Meaningful Connections Systematically
Analyze Prerequisites of Required Tasks
Create a Climate for Open Communication
Organize Essential Content
Provide Effective Learning Aids
Capture and Maintain Attention Through the Use of Novelty
Model
Provide Active Individual Practice
Create Pleasant Conditions and Surrounding
Be Consistent

Dr. McKinney received a number of thoughtful responses concerning her faculty’s skepticism from members of the POD Listserv. Most agreed that principles should not be considered or evaluated as practice. Nevertheless, they also believed that it is important to continue efforts to create meaningful measures to evaluate teaching effectively.

In closing, I'll offer this for thought in lieu of a **Teaching Tip**:

Sometimes one just knows good teaching when they see it, without knowing exactly how to describe it.

Resources:

Bishop, J. Michael. (1984). Infuriating tensions: Science and the medical student. *Journal of Medical Education*, 59(2), 91-102.

Boice, Robert. (1996). *First-order principles for college teachers: Ten basic ways to improve the teaching process*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

Chickering, Arthur W., and Zelda F, Gamson, Eds. (1991). Applying the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *New Direction for Teaching and Learning Series, No. 47*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,.

Covey, Stephen R. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Epstein, Joseph, Ed. (1981). *Masters: Stories of great teachers*. New York: Basic Books,

Professional and Organizational Development Mailing List (to join)
<http://listserv.nd.edu/archives/pod.html>

Principles of On-Line Design
<http://www.fgcu.edu/onlinedesign/>

Yelon, Stephen L. (1996). *Powerful principles of instruction*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers,



MSU Teaching Thoughts #13
Creating the “Complete” Syllabus

We Learn:

- 10% of What We Read
- 20% of What We Hear
- 30% of What We See
- 50% of What We See and Hear
- 60% of What We Write
- 70% of What we Discuss
- 80% of What We Experience
- 95% of What We Teach

(Uno, p. 2)

This once appeared in the syllabus for a course at the University of Saskatchewan, GSR 989: Introduction to University Teaching. Although this breakdown often appears in various teaching and learning contexts, the research supporting this particular breakdown is sketchy. That said, syllabi could focus students’ attention on some important *principles* of learning, things potentially integral to learning the course content.²

Syllabi are a great way to communicate this kind of information to students, and we can use them to relate much more. Unfortunately, we end up often relying on syllabi solely as a means for delivering to students what we deem to be the barest “essential” information. Sometimes, we do not even do that very well. What should a syllabus be? Contract? Prescription? Instruction Manual? Course Outline? Legal Agreement? All of the above? Is a syllabus a *roadmap*? Should it be, as Linda Nilson recommends, an interest provoking

² Dales’s “Cones of Experience” (1946), or facsimiles thereof, purport to emphasize the relative importance of engaging material beyond reading. See Will Thalheimer’s fine Blog piece debunking this myth: http://www.willatworklearning.com/2006/05/people_remember.html.

“travelogue” (Nilson, p. 18)? Ask ten people and you’ll get a wide range of answers, with most respondents believing that a syllabus is in some measure a combination of aspects of the above.

It is not my intent in this short piece to go into detail about the merits and pitfalls of “syllabus-as-contract” or to what degree you should “build-in” to your syllabus room to change your course if certain things are not working. I rather hope with this Teaching Thought that you become acquainted with a few simple guidelines for developing your own version of what Nilson calls the “Complete” syllabus. Suffice it to say I’ve tried a variety of approaches, from creating a ten-page document that explained in detail every aspect of the course, including standards for class conduct, to scripting out only the first four weeks of a course to allow for radical changes if necessary.

How can you transform your syllabi into something that not only informs, but also motivates?

Stan Soffin, MSU Ombudsman and truly one of the nicest people around, has remarked that many undergraduate complaints brought to his attention arise from a misunderstanding about course expectations. It is his belief that instructors could avoid this unpleasantness by creating a good syllabus and referring to it regularly. MSU’s Code of Teaching Responsibility provides a nice framework upon which you can begin to develop a syllabus. Though the Code does not state explicitly what a syllabus should contain, following its guidelines will ensure that you can create a useful document for you and your students.

In its most basic form, a syllabus is a formal statement of course content, student responsibilities, and evaluation criteria. Something to which students can refer throughout the semester as a lasting statement. Therefore, a “bare bones” syllabus must have

- Instructor Name/Office Location/Office
- Course Number/Section Number/Classroom location/Meeting schedule
- Required Text(s)/Classroom materials/Assignments
- Course Objectives/Prerequisites
- Evaluation Procedures (Testing, Class Participation, Attendance Reqs., Missed Exams, Late Assignments)
- Course Outline (Weekly, at least)

At base, students want to know what is being covered, when, how they are being evaluated, and on what scale. Cover these bases well the first day of class. Remind your students regularly. Reduce Professor Soffin’s workload accordingly.

Though these minimums might form the basis of a functional syllabus, they are no formula for creating anything very inviting, are they? I encourage you to use your syllabus to communicate to your students your own creativity, artfulness, and enthusiasm for the subject. Make your syllabus an encouraging and motivating “Welcome!” in which you invite students into the course and into knowing you as an instructor.

With that in mind, *how might you create a syllabus that gets your students motivated in the course?* Might your “‘Complete’ Syllabus” also include:

- A Statement of Acceptable Class Conduct?
- Art?
- A Statement of the Instructor’s Interest in the Subject?
- Instructor’s Background?
- Day-to-day Objectives, including daily “thought-framing” questions to get students focused on the issues at hand?
- Students’ Rights and Responsibilities? (MSU Spartan Life, p. 48-77)
- MSU Code of Teaching Conduct? (MSU Academic Programs, p. 60)
- Course History (Previous class averages, student comments)?
- A “Welcome” Statement?
- Annotated List of Readings?
- A List of Outside Readings (Not required but interesting)?
- Safety Procedures (Labs)?

What Else?

What if you are not the chief architect of your course syllabus? No matter. There are always opportunities to transform what others have given you. Create an addendum featuring your own interests in the course or specific topics. Show your concerns for your students’ learning: Offer up your teaching philosophy. Ask your students about *their* interests. Create your own “Conduct Contract.” You don’t need to change everything right away. Tackle small aspects of syllabus construction/revision first. Check with your peers and your professors for their opinions about your changes. Keep your syllabi as a record of your own intellectual and teaching growth for your teaching portfolio.

I will close with Linda Nilson’s recommendation that you review your syllabus regularly with your students (Nilson, p. 22). Keep them “clued-in” to events *before* they happen. There are some surprises not worth experiencing, right? We can’t expect all of our charges to keep up with the syllabus regularly. Although, in some far away land, students do just that.

When I get to that place, I will send you a postcard.

All the best,
Kevin

Teaching Tip: Involve your students in the creation of your syllabus. On the first day of class, ask your students what interests them the most. Build their responses into the course. The first day is a great time to set behavioral standards as well. Do you create a “Conduct Contract,” or not? Ask!

Resources: (The MSU TA Handbook is a nice place to begin your search for information concerning syllabus construction. It contains some tips for getting started, copies of syllabi, and a copy of the MSU Code of Teaching Conduct.)

Altman, H. B. and W. E. Cashin. (1993). *Writing a Syllabus. IDEA Paper No. 27.* Manhattan, KS: Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development, Kansas State University.

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MSU Ombudsman Website: <http://www.msu.edu/unit/ombud/>

MSU Code of Teaching Responsibility:

<http://hr.msu.edu/documents/facacadhandbooks/facultyhandbook/codeofteaching.htm>

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MSU Teaching Thoughts #14

Making Small But Meaningful Changes to Your Teaching, Now!

“Well, you have to apply just the right amount of heat and stir them intermittently and gently – otherwise you get an omelet. And you don’t let them get completely done in the skillet; turn them out on the plate at the right time and let the heat within them continue the process . . .”

- Linc. Fisch in “Students as Scrambled Eggs and Other Recipes for Teaching” (Full citation below)

I received this response to our MSU Teaching Thought # 12: Teaching Principles v. Teaching Practice:

“I am responding to Teaching Principle 12: It is worthwhile to reflect on our philosophy or principles of teaching. However, most of the time, I feel so much pressure to get the material mastered and find ways to deliver it to my students, that I have little time or energy left to consider my principles.”

The author of this quote went on to comment politely that as a relatively new teacher, she felt that she hardly had time to reflect more about her own philosophy of teaching, much less on how to apply it to her work in the classroom. After a heartfelt, “Thanks!” for her input, I responded that she had already taken a huge leap in her teaching improvement by simply considering that there are deeper meanings to her praxis. I have complete confidence in her ability to eventually work her reflective perspectives into her teaching approach.

I get these kinds of responses to MSU Teaching Thoughts often, particularly when I deal with topics that focus on reflective practice. To me, these kinds of comments in part reflect a serious concern about adequately handling teaching, research, families, life, and everything else - sometimes, all at once. They also mean that I’ve gently prodded someone into responding with a meaningful riposte, something that to my mind greatly enriches our dialogue.

So, out of respect for her remarks, I thought that I’d give you two things that might lighten up your workload. One is the *smile* I hope crossed your face when you read the quote from Linc. Fisch heading this MSU Teaching Thought. He goes on to mention in the chapter that he also “. . .treats some of his students as roast prime rib, applying a lot of heat for a short period of time at the beginning in order to seal in the juices. Then reducing the temperature to complete the process slowly, ensuring a high degree of tenderness (Fisch, 31.)” You must love

someone who links together food preparation and teaching. If you want a copy of the article, let me know. I will gladly send it to you.

Can you think of any food preparation metaphors?

The other is a short list of things you can do **right now** to improve your teaching or improve the way you are relating to your students. After a little thinking about them, you can start tonight, tomorrow, or next week. These are practical and easy to include in your preparation for your next lesson. Some of these things may appear so small as to be insignificant. But, as I mentioned in our [MSU Teaching Thoughts](#) concerning syllabus construction, little steps are all that is necessary to begin a move towards making larger changes. Even the smallest changes take practice. Don't be dismayed if no one responds at first. They will, particularly if you let them know of your intentions.

1. Visualize the blackboard before you go into class. Know what the board will look like after you've put information on it.
2. Slow Down. Make Eye contact. Make more eye contact.
3. How might your students engage in the material? What are their backgrounds? Say "We. . ." or "Us. . ." Stop saying "You. . ." and/or "I. . ."
4. Arrive a few minutes early to class. Use that time for informal discussion only.
5. Stop talking to the blackboard.
6. Pick three key points about tomorrow's lesson. Begin your class with a "large-issue" question, the answer to which reflects those three key issues. Start your class with that question. Put it on the board first. Ask a student to read it out loud to begin.
7. Stop class every 15 minutes to ask students to check one another's notes. Get them to ask each other, "What were the most important things to remember about the preceding 15 minutes?"
8. Consider relevant circumstances beyond the day's lesson/classroom that might relate to your main points.
9. Have main points. Reiterate them regularly during class.
10. Finish class with a strong summary. Link it to the next lesson. MAKE TIME for that. No more ending "with a whimper."
11. Barring dietary restrictions, drink at least 12 ounces of water before you go to sleep. Sleep enough. Begin your day with food and at least 12 ounces of water or juice. Hydrate regularly during the day. At least 30 minutes before class and during if possible. I am not

kidding. Coffee doesn't count, particularly for 3-hour classes. There are few things more irritating than caffeine crash in the middle of class.

12. Let silence occur. Try out my "10-second rule" when allowing students to answer questions. Wait the entire ten seconds before answering. Let students see you think. Let them think.
13. Cut superfluous content. Remember the main points. Ask, "What MOST do I want my students to remember today?" Ask yourself again.
14. Use your students' names (but not in vain!). Learn another one next lesson. Use it as soon as possible. Preferably, not in vain.
15. Give up the chalk when appropriate. Ask a student to write down the most important points of your lecture, discussion, etc. as they occur. Let him or her decide which are important. No coaching from you!
16. Ask questions as if you mean them. Mean them. Answer accordingly.
17. Accept yourself being just "okay" most days. Prepare adequately. That's enough.
18. Laugh more often. You deserve it

Let me know if any of these work. Give us your own ideas.

Resources: Our earlier [MSU Teaching Tips](#) Bibliographies have a number of "tips" references. I didn't want to duplicate them here. I thought instead that I would include only a single reference to something that you could consider as a book new teachers might pick if they could choose only one about teaching. The discussion over what is the best single reference continues at several levels and in a variety of contexts. Although I've three in mind, Carolyn Lieberg's book provides a wonderful beginning for new teachers in higher education.

Lieberg, Carolyn. (2008). *Teaching your first college class: A practical guide for new faculty and graduate student instructors*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Press.



MSU Teaching Thoughts # 15
**Arranging Not to Derange: Organizing Your Classroom Presentations
So Students Know What's Important**

When was the last time you looked at your students' notes? Have you ever noticed their note-taking behavior? Consider the following scenarios:

Scenario One: You're looking upon your class while lecturing or leading discussion and notice that your students' pencils haven't moved at all. You believe that you've got them in the intellectual "palm of your hand!" They're so engaged with the material and your presentational prowess that they don't need to write. And you and I know that *everything* we say is important, right?

Scenario Two: Your students are writing furiously! They're copying what you're writing on the board, nearly every word they're hearing you speak, and adding their own thoughts to their notes (when they can). What you have to say is *so* important that they can't bear to miss a word. You're confident that your skill as an outstanding communicator of your subject will indicate to them what is vitally important *and* provoke them to a greater understanding of the day's lesson.

But, is everything you've talked about that day and written on the board *really* that important? Maybe your students have frozen up, not knowing what to write down because they don't have any idea what it is you want them to remember. Maybe they're writing everything down for the same reason. How can your students tell the difference between the day's seminal points and everything else? How can you use their notes to let you know that they know the difference?

Students' notes can tell you a lot. For one, they can indicate that your charges have come to you without any decent note-taking skills. They can also give you some excellent ideas about how (and if) you're getting your point across. There are many schemes for taking notes effectively and most students should have learned how to take notes before they got to MSU. I could side with either camp in the debate over whether we should be teaching study or note-taking skills in class; however, I won't go into that discussion today. Rather, I would like to

give you some on analyzing your students' notes and then focus on a few recommendations for organizing your class material.

I recommend to those for whom I am doing teaching consultations that they take up their students' notes periodically during the semester, five students at a time, and look at what they have written down. I can tell you from my own experience with students' notes that I have often ended up asking myself "Did I really say that?" Or, "Why did (this student) fail to realize that this was an important point?" Or, "Why has (this student) written poetic musings about a significant other in his notes while I'm lecturing about U.S. foreign policy towards China in the late-nineteenth century?"

What about students' notes indicates that they are having a hard time figuring out what is important? Among other things:

1. **No Outline or paragraph structure.** Indicating that they have not arranged the information hierarchically, in terms of what is most important to least.
2. **No summarizing comments.** Indicating that they do not have a context in which to place what they have written down.
3. **Incorrect Associations.** They have the wrong dates associated with the wrong people or events. They've applied the wrong formulas when trying to answer problems you've provided.
4. **No questions or question marks.** Indicating that they have disengaged with the information beyond what you're saying or writing.
5. **Too many question marks.**
6. **Too much blank space, with no clear connection between points.** They got lost, went to sleep, zoned out, or lost track of the presentation.

What might these indicators reveal about the way you have organized the day's information? Read them again, and ask yourself that question. How might you organize your presentations to avoid most, if not all of these problems?

1. **Write clearly defined points on the board, at the beginning of class.** Refer to them often. What is, really, the most important about the day's material?
2. **Provide daily a short outline of the day's seminal points.** A class website or Angel site is a great way to put this information out to students.
3. **Spend more time explaining, less time pontificating.**
4. **Ask questions about your material.** Answer them meaningfully and hopefully in ways that your students will be able to use later.
5. **Summarize periodically, preferably every fifteen minutes.**
6. **Make your students write.** Take up notes regularly. Assign a portion of the class grade to this exercise.
7. **Spend one day of the semester talking about your presentation strategy.** Show your students what a set of good notes might look like.
8. **Make pertinent associations.** Between facts and analyses, processes and outcomes.
9. **Stick to your strategy. Be consistent.**

Teaching Tip: Rory Kraft, former MSU Philosophy Ph.D. student, TA in IAH 206, and now professor recommends saving administrative announcements for the end of class, especially if you're dealing with a particularly exciting subject that day. "I've found that by moving the 'announcements and administrative' section to the end of class I have been able to get students to interact right off the bat. It almost seemed like by spending the first few minutes talking "at them" about due dates, etc, they lost any desire to talk. I still cover those things; I just set aside the last five minutes of class for that stuff.

(It also seems to have ended the problem of them packing up before class was over -- they know I will be letting them out soon when I move to admin stuff)."

Thanks Rory!

Resources:

For more information about the TA Program's Teaching Consultation Service, please e-mail me at kmj@msu.edu.

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MSU Teaching Thoughts # 16
“How Was I Supposed To Know What *You* Wanted?:”
Effective Testing, Grading and Assessment

“I’ll teach for free, but you’ll have to pay me to grade.”

- Dr. Virginia Johnson Anderson quoting a colleague who had been asked to teach a course after retiring.

An incredibly bright and articulate MSU undergraduate student (the kind I wished that I had been way back then) approached me in tears a couple of weeks ago. This student had performed very poorly on a history exam and had just received her grade. In surprise, I asked her why she thought things had gone poorly. She responded that she didn’t understand the questions; she did not know what her teacher wanted. As it happened, the answers she had provided in no way matched the professor’s or TA’s expectations. We parted with her exclaiming, “But I’d worked so hard to prepare for this test!” I believed her.

Do our students’ test results accurately (and fairly) indicate that they are “getting it”? Are we creating assignments that are worth grading? How are we organizing and using our grading time? How often do we ask during a semester, “Is this class really working? Why or Why not?” At an MSU Lilly Faculty Seminar devoted to effective grading and assessment, Towson State’s Virginia Anderson, Professor, Department of Biological Sciences, asked these and a host of other thought-provoking questions. This MSU Teaching Thought reflects some her seminal points.

I used to think of grading and assessment as being generally the same things, as means to achieve the same sorts of objectives. Dr. Anderson believes differently. For her, grading plays important evaluative, motivational, communicative, and organizational roles. She defines *assessment* as “The systematic gathering and analyzing of information (excluding course grades) to inform and improve student learning . . . in light of goal-oriented expectations.” Grades do not just measure performance. They can also help influence course direction. Assessment isn’t about grades. It is about asking yourself and your students sincerely

(regularly), “What do we need to change to make this course better?” Assessment is also about paying genuine heed to that question’s answers.

What do you think your students rank as the most important criteria for tests and grading? If you said, “Fairness!” you’re spot on (How many of you first thought, “Ease?”). Your students want to know what you expect of them. They want to know what skills to employ when completing the task at hand. In addition, they really want to believe that they are going to do well if they put in the time to study. Of those three concerns, we handle the first two pretty well. We tell them what chapters our exams will cover, right? We give them the exam format. Some of us even provide study sheets with questions that resemble what students will see on the exam. So, when bad grades occur in spite of our help and their preparation, what’s the problem?

Perhaps the problem is that it is often difficult, if not impossible to meet students’ demands that teachers reward effort, particularly in cases where students’ test results and teachers’ expectations do not jibe. Note my friend’s last comment in the first paragraph. “Students view grades equally as rewards for performance AND effort,” Professor Anderson claims. “Grades are their ‘ticket’ for a better life.” Consider too that our students increasingly are considering their education as a commodity. They are paying for what you give them, and grades are in some measure a reflection of their “investment.” If they have put in ten hours of study for an exam, they expect to do well. What happens when they don’t? Who is to blame?

Anderson provided seminar participants with a considerable amount of useful information, much of it from her and Barbara Walvoord’s [Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment](#) (see Resources below). I have culled from her handouts these twelve important points to consider when creating assignments and tests, grading them, and assessing student learning/course effectiveness.

1. “Begin by considering what you want your students to learn.”
2. “Select Tests and assignments that both teach and test the learning you value most.”
3. “Construct a course outline that shows the nature and sequence of major tests and assignments.”
4. “Collaborate with your students to set and achieve goals.”
5. Provide explicit assignment directions. Do not wait six weeks before assigning the first grade.
6. Create comprehensive rubrics to assist you in grading.
7. “Evaluate student work fairly and consistently against established criteria.”
8. “Work smarter, not harder!” Apportion appropriate grading time to the task at hand. Example: Mid terms should take up more of your time qualitatively and quantitatively than one-minute essays.
9. “Frame your comments to the students’ use.”
10. “Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic.”
11. Assessment requires attention to outcomes, but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.”

12. "Learning is a complex process. Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time."

Whether or not you are in a position to create your own exams, you are undoubtedly in a situation where you are responsible for grading students' work. Even if you are required to use others' tests, you can always find ways to improve what you have been given. File your ideas away until you get a chance to make up your own evaluative instruments. Ask to work with your professor while s/he creates exams. Get a feel for their objectives. Ask yourself if you think you are meeting those objectives with the instrument you are using. TAs, don't wilt under the "That's-just-your-opinion" gaze I know you get occasionally from your undergraduates. It *is* your opinion and by virtue of your appointment, you deserve to make it known. However, listen carefully. Students' comments can help you create a better exam, assignment, lab, etc.

In short, don't ask for "orange" answers using "apple" questions. Similarly, make sure you are measuring performances using the correct tools. Professor Anderson claims that in many respects, "What you cover in a class doesn't matter; what students get matters." It is up to us as teachers and graders to find ways to make sure that our students leave class knowing the most meaningful material. Be diagnostic, not punitive in your grading. Try something other than that red pen with which to write comments. Separate your comments from your grades.

Finally, ask your students after handing back their grades on an assignment, "What would you do differently if you had to do this again?"

Do not accept, "I'll study more." as their only answer.

Resources

Ory, John C. and Katherine E. Ryan. (1993). *Tips for Improving testing and grading*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Walvoord, Barbara and Virginia Johnson Anderson. (1998). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey – Bass.

Yelon, Stephen L. (April, 1984). How to use – and create – criterion checklists. *Performance and Instruction Journal*: 1-4.

_____. Using test question formats for tests of knowledge. (September 1988). *Performance and Instruction Journal*: 42 – 45.



MSU Teaching Thoughts #17

**Seeing Yourself on Video Tape and Liking It!:
Teaching Consultations Aren't As Painful as You Think**

by

Randy Hicks, PhD (former MSU Teaching Assistant in Chemistry)

“The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.”
- William Arthur Ward

Although I had served as a Teaching Assistant in Chemistry at MSU for some time now I had the opportunity to be the primary instructor for a course for the first time in 2002. I taught CEM141, general chemistry for non-majors. I had two sections each semester with enrollments of about 350 per section. I believe that I do a good job teaching, but I was always looking to improve – especially since it was only my first year (as a primary instructor). I thought videotaping the class and discussing the results with a teaching consultant would be a useful tool for my development.

As educators, we all want to meet the goals that we have established for our students and classes. Following a class session, I generally know if it went well or whether I covered the materials that I set out to cover. However, I always have some concerns about my performance. I'm not always so clear about my classroom demeanor, or the tone and style of my presentations. I wonder if I am rigid in front of the class. I feel that I am relaxed while teaching, but how do students view me? In addition, although I guard against it, I am afraid I sometimes speak monotonously. Watching a videotape of my class allowed me to see what I am like from a student's perspective and to address these concerns. Watching the tape (even before having follow-up discussions with my evaluator) allowed me to identify things that I felt I did well and others I could improve.

Videotaped lectures can also help you address problems you didn't realize you had. For instance, after watching myself on tape, I realized I might have a problem with time management. Has a student ever said to you, “We spent half a class on this topic, and there wasn't a question about it on the exam!”? Or worse, “We only covered this quickly, and there

was a question about it on the test!” When I was videotaped, I noticed I had spent about 12 minutes covering a point that I felt was relatively unimportant. I didn’t notice it during the class, but after watching, I asked myself why (or how) did I spend so much time on that particular topic? Students often consider that the more time you spend on a topic, the more important it is. Using my tape as a guide, I could see how much time I allocated to each topic and so use that information to help me sharpen my lectures and better develop my tests.

There is another practical aspect of this experience that I hope is useful to you. As I neared the end of my graduate career and began to seek employment in academia, I prepared a teaching portfolio to document my achievements. Inside the front pocket of the portfolio is a CD containing several excerpts that I made from the VHS tape of the class. I think this is a nice component of the portfolio, and especially useful for potential employers that may not have the opportunity to see you in person. It’s not uncommon for a search committee to execute a round of phone interviews before selecting candidates for campus interviews. As budgets continue to shrink, this may become an increasingly common aspect of the job search. Therefore, presenting a CD containing clips of your teaching to the search committee may be an effective way to advertise yourself and gain an advantage on other candidates. I had one telephone interview, and I can state that the committee members were very receptive to my suggestion of mailing them a copy of my portfolio (and CD).

With the technology that is available to us today, the process of creating this CD was surprisingly uncomplicated. Having never done this previously, the process took only 2 ½ hours. Thanks for letting me share some of my consultation experiences with you. I hope that you find them useful in your own professional development.

Randy Hicks

Thanks, Randy! I encourage all of our listserv members to contribute their own Teaching Thoughts. E-mail me for more information at kmj@msu.edu. You can also contact me for more information about MSU’s Teaching Consultation Service or to set up an appointment to talk about your teaching. A consultation generally consists of an introductory meeting, a videotaped class, and a follow-up meeting to discuss the tape. I also compile a narrative report for you summarizing our discussions. **THE ENTIRE PROCESS IS CONFIDENTIAL.** Our website has more detailed information in the TA Program Resources section of our home page, <http://tap.msu.edu>.



MSU Teaching Thoughts #18
**What Are Some Students *Really* Saying
in Their Teaching Evaluations?**

“Recitation was great. It was so confusing that I forgot who I was, where I was, and what I was doing – it’s a great stress reliever.”

- Comments Taken from the *MIT Course Evaluation Guide*

At the end of the semester, I know you are swamped with your own work, grading, and preparing for the break. I thought I would try to inject a little humor into your end-of-the-semester grind. This list of MIT student comments has been floating around for a couple of years. I had it tucked away in my files, waiting for the proper time to share it. Some of these are hilarious; however, do not let the humor overshadow their significance. There is something meaningful within each one of these.

Please enjoy these. I encourage you to send me some of your own.

1. “Text is useless. I use it to kill roaches in my room.”
2. “He teaches like Speedy Gonzales on a caffeine high.”
3. “In class, the syllabus is more important than you are.”
4. “Help! I’ve fallen asleep and I can’t get up!”
5. “Text makes a satisfying ‘thud’ when dropped on the floor.”
6. “The class is worthwhile because I need it for the degree.”
7. “His blackboard techniques put Rembrandt to shame.”
8. “Text book is confusing...someone with a knowledge of English should proofread it.”
9. “Have you ever fallen asleep in a class and woken up in another? That’s the way I felt all term.”
10. “This class was a religious experience for me...I had to take it all on faith.”
11. “The recitation instructor would make a good parking lot attendant. Tries to tell you where to go, but you can never understand him.”
12. “Problems sets are decoys to lure you away from potential exam material.”
13. “He’s one of the best teachers I have had... . He is well organized, presents good lectures, and creates interest in the subject. I hope my comments don’t hurt his chances of getting tenure.”
14. “I would sit in class and stare out the windows at the squirrels. They’ve a cool nest in the tree.”

15. The absolute value of the TA was less than epsilon.”
16. “TA steadily improved throughout the course. . . . I think he started drinking and it really loosened him up.”
17. “Information was presented like a ruptured fire hose spraying in all directions – no way to stop it.”
18. “I never bought the text. My \$60 was better spent on the Led Zeppelin tapes that I used while doing the problem sets.”
19. “What was the quality of the text? The text is printed on high-quality paper.”
20. “The course was very thorough. What wasn’t covered in class was covered on the final exam.”

Teaching Tip: After mid-term evaluations, go over your students’ comments with them. Take about fifteen minutes of a class period to talk about their primary concerns, your thoughts about their concerns, and how you and your students could work together to correct any problems. Involving them in this process ensures that any changes you make will have a greater effect.

Resources:

Cashin, William E. (1999). Student ratings of teaching: Uses and misuses. In Seldin, Peter and Associates. *Changing Practices in Evaluating Teaching: A Practical Guide to Improved Faculty Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*, 25 – 45. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company.

MIT Student Evaluations: <http://web.mit.edu/acadinfo/sse/www/> (This will get you to the information/cover page. Access to the course evaluation forms is limited to MIT personnel only.) My sincere thanks to Lori Breslow, Director of the MIT Teaching and Learning Laboratory and Peggy Enders, MIT Office of Academic Services for their help in tracking these down.

Seldin, Peter and Associates. (1999). *Changing practices in evaluating teaching: A practical guide to improved faculty performance and promotion/ tenure decisions*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Though intended primarily for faculty readers, *Changing Practices* has several chapters devoted to improving student evaluation assessment.

Theall, M. and J. Franklin, Eds. (1990). Student Ratings of instruction: Issues for improving practice. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, No. 43*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. A work from one of the most influential voices in higher education concerning this topic. Mike Theall continues to provide useful advice and information about evaluating teaching to hundreds of his colleagues.



MSU Teaching Thought #19
Outstanding MSU Teaching Assistants
Talk about Their Teaching “Best Practices”

“Always be as professional as you can, but don’t forget to find the joy in your teaching.”

- Douglas Bohl, Ph.D., and self-described “recovering” MSU graduate student

Teaching Assistants enjoy getting advice from their peers, especially teaching advice. I know that because in the Teaching Assistant orientations and seminars I have facilitated over the years, topics taught by TAs or dealt with by TA panels routinely receive their new peers’ highest ratings. Evaluations of the “Outstanding TAs Discuss Teaching” panel in an MSU TA Seminar on College Teaching also support my theory. In our Seminar, MSU TA panelists received a 4.8 (out of five) rating for providing to nearly 200 new Teaching Assistants ideas on what constituted their own “best practices”. Their comments, in the order they were presented, make up this MSU Teaching Thought. Keep in mind as you read these “best practices” that many of them go far beyond practical advice. I will touch on that issue again later in this piece.

April Herndon, doctoral recipient in American Thought & Language and recipient of MSU’s Excellence-in-Teaching Citation, recommended two “best practices.” First, Herndon advised TAs keep a **Teaching Journal**, a running record of teaching progress, problems (and how they were solved), and hours spent preparing for class. The journal should be as much a means for your reflection on teaching as it is an account of your day-to-day schedule. Second, April recommended TAs “**evaluate early and often.**” Regular evaluation and assessment are an effective means to checking your class’s progress. Moreover, routine assessment and *sharing* the results with your students are effective ways to open up further dialogue between teacher and student, one of Herndon’s primary goals.

Mary Jo Cooley Hidecker, doctoral recipient in Audiology and Speech Sciences and also a former Excellence-in-Teaching Citation award-winner, recommended that TAs should **learn when (and when not) to handle classroom conflicts**. Mary Jo’s biggest fear when she started teaching was having to face an angry student during office hours. So, for her, an important teaching “best practice” meant being aware of the power inequities between teacher and student and her developing conversational approaches that ameliorated those inequities. Mary Jo’s advice to TAs? First, **listen carefully. Hold your response until they are finished.** Second, **decide whether you need (or are able) to address the problem at that moment.** Some issues need to be addressed later to allow the parties time to cool off. Assure upset students by setting

up an appointment to address issues later (but not too much later). If you agree to try to settle the problem immediately, **state what you think you know about the problem** and then ask **the student what they think is a fair solution**. This process can avoid either party from doing irreparable harm to the relationship and has them both engaging in discussion equally.

Jennifer Waldron, doctoral recipient in Kinesiology, and holder not only of MSU's Excellence-in-Teaching Citation but also of the prestigious Wohlgamuth Fellowship for her research on body image and self-esteem in high school athletes, provided several "best practices." **Learn students' names** in order to break down classroom social barriers between teachers and students. **Constantly seek outside relevance** to supplement daily class issues. Waldron also suggested that TAs **strive to seek "balance"** in their professional and personal lives. Finally, Jennifer recommended **repeating students' questions to the entire class** as a discussion "best practice." It is an excellent tip teachers can utilize in any classroom setting, especially large lecture.

This was the second time I had invited Dr. Bohl, Engineering, and Anna Monfils, PhD student in Botany and Plant Pathology, to participate on this panel. A former Excellence-in-Teaching Citation winner and known campus wide for his superb teaching, Doug also spends a significant amount of his time teaching young children about the wonders of Engineering. Anna was very active in the TA Program's Teaching Consultation Service and won her department's award as its most accomplished graduate student teacher. Both Doug and Anna advised that TAs **discover the joy in teaching** and in that process **identify their own teaching "voices."** Both offered practical "best practices" suggestions as well. Anna recommended that new TAs **begin organizing their teaching portfolio materials as soon as possible**, ideally, right away. Doug advised the audience to **be aware of the age difference between TAs and undergraduates and how that may affect your role as a teacher**. Many new, younger teachers need to secure a separation between themselves and their charges socially. Dr. Bohl recommended establishing and maintaining that space, particularly when most TAs and undergraduates often are close to the same age.

Although he was not on that year's TA panel, I often looked to Chuck Spurlock, then a doctoral student in Sociology and a key figure in TA development within that department, for input on teaching and learning matters. Chuck recommends teachers do at least two things to help students get the most out of class. For Spurlock, as with Jennifer Waldron, students learn best when they see themselves as something more than an empty vessel waiting to be filled with information. "Students learn best when you know their names," Chuck claims. **"They want to see themselves as having a relationship with the instructor...and will want to accept a greater share of responsibility by being prepared when they come to class."** He also believes that **establishing (and maintaining) class rules positively shapes the class environment**, making it more cohesive. Chuck literally called a town meeting the first day of his social communities class and had students construct class rules of conduct for the meeting and semester. "When they aren't happy," Spurlock notes, "they approach me and say, 'Let's revise our community standard.'" Chuck then mentioned to me that he "Loves it!" I can see why. Being engaged in their own governance helps students feel more engaged in the class.

There are several "Best Practices" lists percolating through higher education's teaching and learning communities. Chickering and Gamson have spurred much of the recent work on teaching "best practices." You will find their precepts at the heart of many other lists you might encounter. In brief, they are:

1. Good practice encourages student faculty contact
2. Good practice encourages cooperation among students
3. Good practice encourages active learning
4. Good practice gives prompt feedback
5. Good practice emphasizes time on task
6. Good practice communicates high expectations
7. Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning

How do these recommendations fit in with your own ideas and practice of teaching? Look closely at them. These are not specific prescriptions. Chickering and Gamson believe instead that these key *results* occur when teachers employ certain teaching practices. Therefore, perhaps there *is* a difference between considering exactly what you *do* in the classroom and what *outcomes* you think you want to produce. If you look back over the TA's comments in this piece, you will quickly be able to separate the practice from the outcome. Both constitute a "best" of some sort. Figuring *how* they relate is my challenge to you. Start practicing your own best techniques now in order to create the outcomes you think your students should experience.

In closing, "Many thanks!" to our contributors for their observations on what they think constitutes teaching best practices. Dr. Bohl, the author of our opening quote, has taken his first academic position at the United States Naval Academy, Annapolis. We miss him, as do his students, and wish that he continues to find his "joy" in teaching. Good luck, Doug.

Teaching Tips: Make a list of your own three best practices. How has what you have listed produced the outcomes you desire? Use those answers to create your next class assessment tool.

Resources:

Chickering, A.W., and Gamson, Z.F. (1991). *Applying the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning Series. Number 47, Fall 1991. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (See this and other articles on Best Practices at Ted Panitz <http://home.capecod.net/~tpanitz/#Good>)

Lowman, Joseph. (1995). *Mastering the techniques of teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,

McKeachie, W. J. et. al. (2002). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers*. (11th Ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (A classic text and perhaps more often recommended than any other for teaching development.)

Newby, Timothy J. (1996). *Instructional technology for teaching and learning: Designing instruction, integrating computers, and using media*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill.

Nilson, Linda B. (2003). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors*, 2nd Ed. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company,

Reis, Rick. "Tomorrow's Professor." (One of the best active lists concerning issues related to teaching and learning in higher education. Rick's articles are the most comprehensive lists of ongoing research information available.)

Richlin, Laurie. (2006). *Blueprint for learning: constructing college courses to facilitate, assess, and document learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Press.

The National Teaching and Learning Forum (NT&LF) <http://www.ntlf.com/>

The Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning (SCIL) <http://scil.stanford.edu/>

Anyone can SUBSCRIBE to Tomorrows-Professor Listserv by addressing an e-mail message to:

<Majordomo@lists.stanford.edu>

Do NOT put anything in the SUBJECT line but in the body of the message type:
subscribe tomorrows-professor

University of Washington. Re-Envisioning the PhD Project also contains a “Best Practices” section. <http://www.grad.washington.edu/envision/index.html>



MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

TEACHING ASSISTANT PROGRAMS

MSU Teaching Thoughts #20

Meta-Analyses of Present Research on The State of Graduate Education for Future Faculty

“There is a mismatch of our preparation of graduate students and their first experiences as faculty.”

- Ann Austin, MSU Assoc. Professor
Higher, Adult, &
Life Long Education

[Note: The Professional and Organizational Developers (POD) (made up of “Podders,” as some call them) is devoted primarily to the research and discussion of pedagogical development efforts in higher education. Most of those who attend its annual gathering are faculty and TA developers, university and college administrators, and a host of researchers chiefly interested in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Much of the information in this MSU Teaching Thought is derived from information I gathered at the annual POD conference in Atlanta, Georgia in 2002. As part of the program, MSU’s Ann Austin and her long-time colleague, Don Wulff (University of Washington), discussed their findings concerning the state of graduate education in the United States. What follows in this MSU Teaching Thought is a short summary of their presentation. Look for Don and Ann’s recent book, *Paths to The Professoriate*, published by Jossey Bass in Spring, 2004.]

The Problem:

Although most faculty at Research One (R1) institutions put the bulk of their energy into their own research and into developing their graduate students as researchers, scholars of the academy have been asking hard questions lately about how traditional Ph.D. training meets the real needs of future faculty. These questions are extremely important, particularly as R1 tenure-track jobs for most graduate students entering the job market are becoming increasingly rare and harder to get. Ironically, these trends aren’t having much of an influence on the way R1 institutions prepare their graduate students. If Professor Austin’s claims are accurate (see above), and there’s considerable research to prove that they are, one might say that Research 1 universities suffer from a troubling case of professional development myopia.

Several studies seeking to explicitly define the state of graduate education have emerged in the last three years. They consist of surveys of thousands of graduate students and of interviews with new faculty, graduate students’ major professors, and department chairpersons (see below). To varying degrees, these studies’ authors focused on the quality of preparation of graduate students for their academic careers. They addressed issues regarding departments’ professional socialization efforts, whether or not chances for effective mentoring existed within

units, the availability (or lack) of information about formal job requirements and informal professional norms, whether departments provided support for underrepresented groups, and whether or not programs routinely provided meaningful feedback on issues ranging from classroom conduct and research to how one conducted oneself professionally at conferences.

The results are frightening. Although R1's do a great job providing their graduate students with research training, for the most part they do a terrible job preparing graduate students for everything else they'll be expected to do as faculty. Golde/Dore, Nerad, Nyquist, et al, and the NAGPS study reveal that most departmental graduate programs lack a systematic approach to teacher/advisor training of their graduate students. In addition, they do a terrifically poor job of helping graduate students understand institutional citizenship/service (governance, committee work), rarely train their students in outreach and public service, and conduct almost no ethical training. And even though R1 faculty focus most of their efforts on developing their students' research capabilities, these studies report that participants claimed having little experience with systematic preparation for the publishing process, very little training in attaining grants and other forms of outside funding, and almost no guidance in interdisciplinary collaboration.

Barring exceptional cases then, graduate students more often than not emerge from their training, Ph.D. in hand, with very little understanding beyond research of what it takes to be a successful professional. Unfortunately, they spend their first years scrambling to learn everything else on the job. Add to this troubling mix the fact that R1 graduates are trained to work within the system they've been raised and that in most cases they *won't* get jobs in that system right away, and what might be emerging for you is a powerfully confusing picture of the relationship between professional training and professional life.

The Challenge:

So, what jobs have you considered you're most likely to hold after graduating? Beyond funding, salary, and workloads, what exactly *aren't* they telling you in a job advertisement about intra- and interdepartmental faculty relationships? Graduate student and undergraduate student/faculty relationships? Mentoring opportunities? In addition to your research record, how does your record of *teaching* assist you in attaining a job (particularly if, like most MSU Ph.D. graduates, your first job is at someplace other than a Research I institution)? What are your future teaching loads? Advising requirements? Are there cases when, such as at Davidson College, North Carolina (recently listed as one of the top 25 small colleges in the country), faculty are expected to spend time with students beyond their teaching and advising duties? How much service learning are you expected to conduct in your new position? What about time in outreach programs? Have you figured out how many committees on which your expected serve? And, what's it like serving on a committee anyway?

What Can Be Done?:

Austin and her colleagues' research hints that considering these issues when applying for a job considering could contribute greatly to prospective faculty members' emotional and professional well-being. Not surprisingly, they also conclude that working in a positive departmental climate, one in which faculty and graduate students relate well collegially, has a considerable amount to do with new faculty future success.

Any good news? Yes. Austin and her colleagues have increased considerably the national conversation on these issues. Their own graduate students and the faculty with whom these authors work carry with them the hopes that in small stages they can begin to reform departmental climates and improve the graduate student and faculty professional experience. Changes like the ones Ann and her compatriots are trying to affect often take a generation or two, but at least serious talk *at the departmental level* about these issues has been expanded tremendously. As you complete your graduate training and set out to fulfill your own professional aspirations, you might consider how these concerns shape your own futures. In what kind of department do you want to work? What does *collegiality* mean to you and how important is it? Finally, as Ann often asks people who attend her workshops, what does it mean for you to have a *whole* life?

Teaching Tips: When you're ready to go on the job search, be sure to include in your preparation a thorough study of the institutions to which you're applying. Match your teaching materials to their job requirement descriptions. Call ahead with questions concerning teaching loads, advising requirements, committee service. Peruse university and college sites for student profiles. In addition to your queries about research and publication expectations, have a set of interview questions about relationships between students and faculty on hand when you get to the interview stage.

Resources: (Much of the following comes from a list of resources provided by Professors Ann Austin and Donald H. Wulff during their presentation, "A Synthesis of Research on Graduate Education for Future Faculty," which occurred during the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Conference, "Hold Fast The Dream, October 12, 2002 in Atlanta, Georgia.)

Austin, A.E. (2002, January February). Preparing the next generation of faculty: Graduate School as socialization to the academic career. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73 (1), 94-122.

Golde, C. M., & Dore, T. M. (2001). At cross purposes: What the experiences of doctoral students reveal about doctoral education (<http://www.phd-survey.org>). Philadelphia, PA: A report prepared for the Pugh Charitable Trusts.

Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. New York: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers.

Nerad, M., & Cerny, J. (2002). Improving doctoral education: Recommendations for Ph.D.'s – ten years later study. *Council of Graduate School's Communicator*, 33 (2).

Nyquist, J. D., Austin, A.E., Sprague, J., & Wulff, D. H. (2001). The development of graduate students as teaching scholars: A four-year longitudinal study (Final Report, Grant #199600142). Research supported jointly by the Spencer Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.



MSU Teaching Thoughts #21

How You Say It Can Make a Difference

“The most disturbing effect of weak language lies in the fact that it can profoundly undermine otherwise strong teaching.”

- Joan Middendorf & Stephen Yandell

Read and compare the following two statements: 1) “I hope you appreciate not having to read the entire book.” And, 2) “You should pay attention to the pages I’ve assigned.” Do the same for these next two scenarios: 1) “If you didn’t do well on this quiz, don’t worry. There was a lot of material to study and it only counts for a small portion of your grade.” And, 2) “If you didn’t do well on this quiz, you will want to review the material more closely. Please come see me if you have questions about the material...”

If you were a student and your instructor used the first sentence in each of these pairs, how would you react? How might you respond to the second sentences in each pair? Is there a difference? Indiana University’s Joan Middendorf and Stephen Yandell maintain that there is. In “Replacing Weak Language with Strong: Transforming Your Teaching Persona,” a recent article in the National Teaching & Learning Forum, they qualified the first statements in the pairs above as examples of weak language, the second statements in each pair as strong.

The authors maintain that students *do* react differently according to the language that teachers use with them. Middendorf and Yandell believe that “strong” language communicates credibility. Weak language on the other hand, used even in the best organized, best facilitated, and most pedagogically sound classrooms communicates a lack of teacher confidence and low student expectations. Weak language is ambiguous and self-doubting. It even *sounds* ambiguous and self-doubting. Moreover, because weak language can be embedded in our speech patterns, it is very hard to self-diagnose. Their research also reveals that the source of many student complaints and low teaching evaluations can be traced to language factors about which teachers are not even aware. Apologies and overly polite speech can undermine confidence in a teacher’s ability and alarmingly, first impressions are often hard to shake, even through the entire semester.

The authors offer the following advice to help teachers avoid weak language or behavior:

1. Avoid the using rising intonation at the end of sentences.
2. Don't sound doubtful.
3. Avoid apologizing for things students have responsibility for.
4. Don't put yourself down.
5. Don't over-praise students.
6. Don't provide an open forum for students to criticize your teaching.

Teachers *should* be aware of not only what they say, but also how they say it. Changing the way you lecture to your students, question them, and direct them to task can have a strong effect on how they respond to you. However, Middendorf and Yandell warn that strong language used inappropriately can appear cold and insensitive, and it can lead to the same sorts of communicative dissonance that weak language creates between teacher and student. They also point out that because of what most students deem as their inherent authority, older Caucasian males can generally get away with language that, when used by others, communicates significant doubt (Middendorf & Yandell, 2002, p. 8; Feldmann, 2001, p.139). On the other hand, white males can suffer from students' expectations if they try to take themselves out of the authority position, as by seeking to avoid dominating a discussion when students expect them to lead it.

Perhaps the key to effectively employing strong communication is practicing a receptive and empathetic confidence, but with an awareness of your own teaching language and style. As teachers, some of us are humorous, others demonstrative, others more subdued. All these approaches can be effective. But what works best for you? In his chapter on lecturing, written for *University Teaching*, Jerry Evensky admits that he's "...not even sure how to describe my own style. It's certainly pretty low-key. I just know it's mine, it's me, and most students seem to respond to it. Ultimately, that's all that matters (Lambert, Tice, & Featherstone, p. 28)."

As you begin to work on your approach to teaching, I encourage you to consider the following: Although changing your tone and style can make you a more effective communicator, always teach in manner that suits you best. Seek to find your authentic teaching "voice" and trust it. Students can and will respond positively to all kinds of teaching styles and voices, but they can also spot a fraud right away. Think about your style, about what you are saying and how you say it. Ask yourself then, "How is this who I am as a teacher?" The more confident you are in your approach to teaching and in your ability to prompt student interest in the material, the happier you and your students will be.

And really, that's all that matters.

Teaching Tip: Students rank "relevance" very highly on their list of things that help them engage with class material. Not surprisingly, I have heard teachers often exclaim they teach best the things about which they know and enjoy the most. Before *every* class, take five minutes to list three ways the day's material relates to your students' understanding of it *beyond* the classroom. That approach lies at the heart of Rachel A. Smith's teaching philosophy. A Ph.D. recipient in MSU's College of Communication who received an MSU Excellence in Teaching Citation, she knows what she's talking about.

Resources:

Adams, Maurianne, Ed. (1992). *Promoting diversity in college classrooms: Innovative responses for the curriculum, faculty, and institutions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Boice, Robert. (1996). *First-Order principles for college teachers: Ten basic ways to improve the teaching process*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

Chickering, Arthur W., and Zelda F. Gamson, Eds. (1991). Applying the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, No. 47. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Feldman, Lloyd J. 2001. *College teaching* 49(4), 137-140.

Lambert, Leo M., Stacey Lane Tice, and Patricia H. Featherstone, Eds. (1996). *University teaching: A guide for graduate students*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Middendorf, Joan, and Yandell, Stephen. (2002). Replacing weak language with strong: Transforming your teaching persona. *The National Teaching and Learning Forum* 11(5), 7-9.

Yelon, Stephen L. Powerful principles of instruction. (1996). White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers. (Okay, this book keeps popping up in this publication, and for good reason. Steve's book is the most adaptable approach to understanding teaching principles of which I know. He remains one of the most influential thinkers on the subject as far as I am concerned.)



MSU Teaching Thoughts #22 **Faculty Behaving Badly**

“Might not faculty misconduct in teaching provoke [the] growing problem of student misbehavior in the classroom [Braxton and Brayer, 1999 (brackets mine)]?”

Since fall 1999, I have had a list posted on my shelves above my desk. It is in plain view, all text emboldened, kind of weathered now. And rarely have I gone through a day without looking at it at least once. The list, which identifies seven intolerable categories of teaching behavior, comes from John Braxton and Alan Bayer’s *Faculty Misconduct in College Teaching*, one of the most thoroughly researched treatments of what can go wrong in a classroom I have ever encountered. Since the late 1980s, K through 12 public school teachers have been the subject of such studies. *Faculty Misconduct* stands as one of the first of such treatments devoted to higher education.

Braxton and Bayer work from Robert Merton’s premise that professional groups share beliefs about desired or expected behaviors in given situations or circumstances. Using an instrument they created called the College Teaching Behaviors Inventory (CTBI), the authors conducted a six-year survey of 1003 faculty from Research 1, Liberal Arts, and Community Colleges (Braxton and Bayer, p.14) to determine what constituted teaching’s *inviolable norms* and which behaviors represented the strongest violations of good faculty conduct.

Establishing these norms wasn’t easy. In fact, during the first round of surveys, when asked to create a list of expectations they held for college teachers, most faculty respondents responded with lists of expectation for *student* behavior. But eventually the authors identified 8 categories of 126 behaviors related generally to course preplanning, first-day performance, in-class conduct, content coverage, testing and grading practice, collegial relationships, and faculty-student interactions, both in and out of class. What follows is a condensed version of their findings, including the seven inviolable norms and those behaviors most often associated with them.

In my surveys of undergraduates’ opinions of what constitutes improper faculty behavior, most student complaints boiled down to issues having to do with whether or not they felt faculty members “cared” about them and their progress (See [MSU Teaching Thoughts # 10](#) Irritating Faculty Behaviors). There is not much “caring” demonstrated in the following behaviors, is there?

Make your own list. Stick it up next to your computer. Revisit it regularly, especially after you have conducted a class, office hours, or tutoring. Are you hearing any warning bells?

The Seven Intolerable Categories of Teaching Behavior

(And the behaviors respondents rated as the *most* egregious.)

- 1. Condescending Negativism**
 - o The instructor makes condescending remarks to students in class.
 - o The instructor expresses impatience with a slow-learner in class.
 - o A faculty member criticizes the academic performance of a student in front of other students.
 - o An advisee is treated in a condescending manner.
 - o A faculty member makes negative remarks about a colleague in public before students.
- 2. Inattentive Planning**
 - o Required texts and other reading materials are not routinely ordered by an instructor in time to be available for a class session.
 - o A course outline or syllabus is not prepared for a course.
- 3. Moral Turpitude**
 - o A faculty member has a sexual relationship with a student enrolled in the class.
 - o A faculty member makes suggestive sexual comments to a student enrolled in the course.
 - o While able to conduct class, the instructor frequently attends class while intoxicated.
- 4. Particularistic Grading**
 - o Social, personal or other non-academic characteristics of students are taken into account in the awarding of students grades.
 - o The instructor allows a personal friendship with a student to intrude on the objective grading of her work.
 - o Stated policies about late work and incompletes are not universally applied to all students.
 - o Individual students are offered extra-credit work to improve their final course grade after the term is completed.
 - o Students are not permitted to express viewpoints different than those of the instructor.
- 5. Personal disregard**
 - o The instructor practices poor personal hygiene and regularly has offensive body odor.
 - o The instructor frequently uses profanity in class.
 - o Class is usually dismissed early.
 - o The instructor is routinely late for class meetings.
- 6. Uncommunicated Course Details**
 - o The instructor changes classroom location to another building without informing students in advance.
 - o The instructor changes class meeting times without informing students.
 - o Students are not informed of the instructor's policy on missed or make-up examinations.
- 7. Uncooperative Cynicism**
 - o A faculty member refuses to advise departmental majors.
 - o A faculty member refuses to participate in departmental curricular planner.
 - o An instructor expresses a cynical attitude toward the role of teaching.
 - o A faculty member's involvement in research is so great that he or she fails to prepare adequately for class.

Teaching Tip: We have all had them, the professors with the yellowed notes, dog-eared and worn after years of usage. "Updates" to faculty like this are a fact or two penned in on top of the previous year's information. If you have ever had a chance to look at a set of notes like that, don't be surprised to find them filled with some interesting marginalia. From time to time, all

of us will need to reuse a previous set of class notes. Here is a way to make that recycling a little more effective. Most of us probably work from sets of notes, slides, Power Point, black boards, and/or a host of other materials we work into our class presentations and activities. I've found it very helpful to take five minutes as soon as possible after class to write down three things that worked well during a class, and three things that didn't. If possible, I also jot down short explanations for both sets of information. *I keep my comments with the sets of class notes as a future reference should I teach the same course again.* Even if I don't come back to those notes for an entire semester (or longer), my comments help me make decisions about how I might conduct the class next time.

Resources:

Conflict Resolution Web Site: <http://www.crinfor.org>

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