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CTEAG membership: John O'Rorke (POSC), Jodi Welsch (EDUC), Tracy Edwards (GEOG), and Jennifer Flinn (PSYC).

Please feel free to contact any member of the CTEAG or e-mail us at CTE@frostburg.edu if you have any suggestions for future issues.

In This Issue: Something to Think About; This month's featured article "Learning from Classroom Assessment;" An in-class learning technique; Advice from some new faculty; and Announcements/Upcoming Events.

Something to Think About: "Apathy is one of the characteristic responses of any living organism when it is subjected to stimuli too intense or too complicated to cope with. The cure for apathy is comprehension."
~John Dos Passos

Learning from Classroom Assessment

by D. Allen Bensley, (PSYC)

The most important reason for doing assessment of student learning is to use assessment to improve student learning. Using assessment results to improve instruction or programs is commonly referred to as 'closing the loop' in assessment circles, if you will pardon the pun, but I argue that that this is too limited of a view of learning from assessment. Rather, instructors and students should learn from assessment *throughout* the cycle.

Classroom assessment is inherently a scientific enterprise. In this view, instructors are scientists who test hypotheses about students' knowledge and skills and how effective specific instructional strategies are in helping students increase their knowledge and skills. Instructors already behave this way implicitly to some extent. They have expectations about what students should learn. They test that learning with various quizzes, exams, assignments, and other evaluations. They ultimately interpret this data and assign grades to students based on the data. What I am suggesting is a slight shift in approach so that instructors behave more explicitly the way scientists behave. Instructors should systematically and carefully make observations of the learning going on in their classrooms, collecting assessment data (on good measures) designed to test this learning. They should test hypotheses about what students know and about the effectiveness of the teaching strategies they use based on careful evaluation of their assessment data.

In assessment there are two important questions to ask: "What should students learn in my course?" and "What do I think my students are learning?" It's easy to answer by saying that students are learning the subject matter and that the grades they receive show that they have learned. More serious reflection on these questions, however, may reveal aspects of knowledge that were not previously considered. For example, if grades were based on recognition of factual details on a multiple choice exam, do students also comprehend these facts? Could students also recall these facts and present them in a coherent written response? Could they use these facts to discuss a real-world application? Some skills may require more careful reflection than others. For example, critical thinking is almost universally accepted as a desirable educational outcome, instructors and educators are often very unclear about what it is. Without clarity of definition in what skills should be taught, it is unlikely that an instructor will clearly specify lessons that will promote critical thinking in ways that can be readily and efficiently taught to students and that can be assessed to clearly demonstrate that the skills have been acquired.

Instruction of such complex skills can be made much more efficient, however, if objectives are clearly specified and lessons and assignments directly teach the critical thinking skills. These should also be closely aligned with

quizzes, exams, and other performance measures, and assessments that measure the same skills. Students should receive feedback on all lessons, exercises, quizzes, and exams to allow them to evaluate their progress. These frequent episodes of assessment can be done so that content and subject matter of the materials used in lessons, quizzes, exams, and assessments vary to promote transfer of these skills to different kinds of content. This direct infusion approach to teaching critical thinking, not only allows instructors to closely monitor student learning and to evaluate whether lessons and assessment devices need to be improved, but helps students improve performance throughout the course. This makes it much more likely that students will show improved performance on an independent measure of critical thinking skills well aligned with the skills developed in the course. My colleagues and I have been able to show that this approach works well in teaching argument analysis skills (Bensley, Crowe, Bernhardt, Buckner, & Allman, in press; Bensley & Haynes, 1995).

Conducting assessment research studies in the classroom have helped me and can help instructors learn from the assessment process to become more effective and reflective practitioners. Frequent assessment and feedback in a guided learning context throughout a course can efficiently promote learning in both instructors and students by providing a structure for evaluating student learning outcomes. In this way, assessment can actually improve student learning as part of a course even before a final outcome is determined.

References

Bensley, D. A., Crowe, D. S., Bernhardt, P., Buckner, C., & Allman, A. L. (in press). Teaching and assessing critical thinking skills for argument analysis. *Teaching of Psychology*.

Bensley, D. A. & Haynes, C. (1995). The acquisition of general purpose strategic knowledge for argumentation. *Teaching of Psychology, 22*, 41-45.

Teaching Technique: Walk-about-Sharing

By John O'Rorke (POSC)

One of the biggest challenges teachers face is encouraging students to remain focused during the entire class session. Attention spans vary, but research suggests that most students grow distracted within a 20-25 minute time span. As a result, many authors recommend "mixing it up" after about 20 minutes of class. This technique incorporates the mix-it-up strategy with group interaction and physical activity to truly change the pace and encourage student retention for the entire class.

Distribute a worksheet to each student with a set of questions for them to answer. Give them time to individually answer the questions. After an appropriate interval, dictated by the level of sophistication, number, and degree of difficulty of the questions, select ½ of the class (every other student works well) and designate them "the walkers." The other half are "the sitters." Instruct the walkers to a "walk-about" to the sitters. The walkers compare their answers to those of the sitters. The goal is to see how many answers students have in common. You may specify that students are to compare only 1 question with each seated student and then move to the next student – creating a constant flow of traffic, or you may have them compare only until they find a shared answer then move on, or you may allow students to compare their entire worksheet of answers with a seated student before moving on to the next sitter. Your job during this part of the exercise is to make sure students stay on track and keep moving. Don't let this turn into a general conversation period. Remind them to stay focused on the assigned questions and to keep moving.

After an appropriate amount of time, call the students back to their seats and ask about what answers showed up most frequently – the most shared answers – and discuss them. Also ask about any answers that were not shared – unique – or any answers that had a low frequency of occurrence and discuss them as well.

Using this technique, students gain valuable reinforcement about their answers, while also getting exposure to alternative ideas and perspectives. Additionally, they are more actively engaged in the learning process. Further, this technique helps to develop a camaraderie among students, creating a friendlier classroom environment that

is less intimidating and more learner centered, while keeping the students focused on the materials. I have also found that this technique wakes up the entire class, not just the walkers, and provides a much needed re-energizing midway through a class session. It's a simple technique that provides multiple benefits for learning.

Advice from some relatively new members of the FSU teaching community

Sometimes those of us who have been at FSU for a very long time, forget what it was like to be a new member of the community. We forget the challenges we faced during those initial few years. So, the Center for Teaching Excellence Advisory Group solicited input from some of our newer faculty members. We asked them for any advice they would give to new hires or any advice they have for the rest of us who are a bit longer in the tooth. We'd like to thank those of you who responded to our inquiries and wish you the best of luck here at FSU.

Here's what they said (in no particular order):

Make sure to locate the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs on the fifth floor of the library and befriend Frank and David since you'll be going to them for travel grants, as well as other internal and external grant funding.

Sometimes the campus sidewalks don't get salted at night, watch out for ice!

The world of higher education is a strange, wonderful place full of almost tragic irony and tremendous opportunity. We teach the latest ideas and practices in a variety of fields. We stay on the cutting edge of our scholarship and practice, and yet we are deeply entrenched in traditions and notoriously slow to change. I have noticed that in spite of what we may know about teaching and learning, we do not apply it to our own teaching and learning. We know learning is a social phenomenon, yet we tend to work in isolation. We know learning requires timely and detailed feedback, yet we do not ever get or give any to each other on our own teaching practices. We know that people learn best when we accept them for who they are and work patiently to help them grow as individuals, yet we constantly complain about the quality, attitudes, and abilities of our students. We know that partnerships, dialogue, and systems thinking across disciplines and between stakeholders promotes consistency, understanding, and effectiveness in what we are trying to accomplish as educators, yet we are often stymied by the disputes that divide us (faculty vs. administrators, liberal arts vs. hard science vs. practice oriented fields (business and education). My suggestion to new faculty is to rise above these paradoxical issues and apply what you know to what you do. Overcome isolated practice by creating community, look for opportunities to give and receive feedback, love your students as they are and help them to become more, rise above petty squabbles and political interests to make a difference; and, finally, do not become cynical when your attempts to do this feel like an uphill battle. Change comes slowly, but persistence and devotion to a cause brings change over time. On the other side of the coin, we have the best job in the world. We are able to teach something we love to people we love in a place we love. Regardless of the challenges of what we experience, there is no place I would rather be and nothing I would rather be doing than this. The first year may be a challenging transition and a really busy time in your life, but it gets better and better as time goes on.

The biggest adjustment I have learned is that there is only so much you can do to develop a course the first time you teach it. Gaining familiarity with the content is my primary goal as an instructor the first time through. After an initial semester of experience, the method of delivery is something that I continually revisit to ensure that students are engaged and taking responsibility in the course. Although my courses will never be perfect for me, developing them by a reasonable amount each time I cover them, hopefully makes for better courses over the long run.

I think it would be very helpful to have some sort of comprehensive list of responsibilities that will be added to new faculty members as they are here over the first few semesters. For example, my department does not require committee participation for new faculty, but it would be nice to know when these responsibilities will be added and specifically what impact these have on evaluations. (For example, you cannot get more than a "3" in the service category during the first year.) Also, some sort of training for advising students would be very helpful because there are so many loopholes!

Upcoming Events

The Center for Teaching Excellence Advisory Group will once again be hosting a ***Reflection Reception*** in the upstairs room at the **Sand Spring Saloon, Friday December 4, from 3-5 PM**. Mindful of the budget situation, CTEAG members will NOT be charging the University for this event. We will foot the bill ourselves (although donations will be accepted). So please come join us for a friendly informal reception where you can share ideas about teaching and learning; ask questions of CTEAG members; give and get advice; and enjoy delicious snacks & beverages.