

TEACHING & LEARNING

In this issue:

- Engaging First Year Students
- Blackboard comes to Saint Mary's
- Clicker Talk
- The Roving Reporter talks to students

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First Year Seminars: Could this work at Saint Mary's? ENVS 1200 (Environmental Challenges)

Dr. Jeremy Lundholm, Environmental Studies/Biology

When I volunteered to put together a new first-year course in Environmental Studies, I was responding to the need for a first year course that did not simply duplicate other offerings at a more basic level. Many schools across North America have developed what are termed "First-year Seminars", first-year courses that provide an introduction to a particular discipline, but more importantly, an introduction to learning at the university level. The emphasis in such courses is less on mastering the content of first-year textbooks, and more on basic survival skills (read: study, time management, and communication skills). These courses are not like fourth year seminar courses, nor do they replace traditional content-heavy first-year courses. The Task Force on Student Success recognizes the potential of such courses and supports the development of "purposeful, inquiry-based first-year courses addressing university life and learning which build foundational skills while introducing students to the disciplines and their history and forms of discourse." (p. 16, see full report at www.smu.ca/administration/caid/documents/StudentSuccessCommitteeFinalReport.pdf)

The Environmental Studies program at Saint Mary's is intended to be interdisciplinary, and I believe that this provided the original rationale for not having a first-year environmental studies course for majors; they would take basic sciences first, and then begin environmental studies courses in second year after they had some background in several traditional disciplines. We found that students were frustrated with having to wait several years to accumulate the required courses before they could take their first Environmental Studies course. We also figured we could attract and retain more students as majors if they could get a taste for the discipline earlier in their program.

I started with three anchors for the course: there would be no textbook, but we would read popular non-fiction instead; the labs would be hands-on, open-ended and project-based, not the canned labs that are typical of first-year courses; and the students would be introduced to *people* from as many



Dr. Jeremy Lundholme, Sept 07 (photo Paul Darrow)

relevant disciplines as possible.

In order to encourage students to read in the environmental field, I selected three texts. *Silent Spring* (Rachel Carson) was assigned to give the students some historical context for the modern field of environmental science and some background on the environmental movement. It also provided a non-technical introduction to the fundamentals of chemical pollution which are still central to environmental issues today. Next was *A Short History of Progress* (Ronald Wright), the Massey Lecture from several years back. This introduced the students to some controversial perspectives on societal

collapse. Finally, *Shoveling Fuel For A Runaway Train* (Brian Czech), a primer on ecological economics which skewers the myth of unlimited economic growth, was assigned. Each book has a different writing style and level of vocabulary. In order to build literacy and give the students credit for reading, I asked them to submit weekly 'reading guides', each a set of questions and definitions centered on the weekly readings. As anyone who has switched to a course pack from a text book will know, students are very grateful to save money at the book store. I felt that reading more than 600 pages might be too much for a first year course, but the pages are small and the reading is compelling. I stuck with it because I believe that developing a reading 'habit' is an essential precursor to good writing and to general scientific literacy. In general, the students reacted favorably to the readings, although they felt that there was too much repetition in *Silent Spring*. In the words of one student: "I just wanted to thank you so much for giving us such wonderful reading materials! It is such a refreshing break from a huge technical textbook. All 3 books are a reflection from the world outside of university about everything that we will be learning about, and as an extra added benefit they didn't cost an arm and a leg. Thank-you!". Besides the exams and the books, I tried to make this course "paperless": no paper handouts, course outlines or assignments. This resulted in a few headaches early in the semester as many students were not familiar with SMUport or had trouble accessing their email accounts.

I have had experience in 2nd to 4th year courses with project-based learning, in which students are tasked with solving problems in the lab. My philosophy is that this approach can be used at any level, with the difference being in the amount of structure and guidance provided by the instructor. Knowing that two-thirds of the class was in their first year of university, I assumed virtually no background knowledge or experience with scientific methods. As a general introduction to the university environment, I had the students ask and answer a scientific question centering on the SMU campus. In part, this was to familiarize the students with a very local and concrete example of how environmental challenges are structured, but it was also an opportunity for me to learn more about what's going on, on campus.

The first lab featured a campus tour led by four members of Facilities Management. They were very enthusiastic and I got the impression that they typically have little involvement with teaching on campus. We toured the physical plant, including boiler room and waste management facilities and were introduced to some of the sustainability initiatives happening on campus. Again, the idea was for the students to begin understanding the campus environment from as many perspectives as possible. I emphasized throughout the course the social and organizational environment that interacts with the biophysical environment. The students became very aware of the importance of these connections as they found out who was in charge of various campus operations and got permission to conduct various studies. We also worked closely with several members of SMUES (the SMU Environmental Society) to identify problems that were interesting to their membership. Students asked questions about waste management, pesticide use on campus, grey water production and one group surveyed student environmental knowledge and attitudes. One student wrote: "The SMU sustainable campus lab was very challenging. Choosing one's own topic and conducting an experiment is great because it requires creativity, and teaches us how to conduct the different steps. I am in my third year of the environmental program and this is the first hands on project I have been required to do. University is rarely hands on, I often feel as though I will not be prepared when I get in to the work force. This project is making me feel more confident about conducting my own research."

Students organized themselves into groups by common interest and collected data together, wrote separate final reports and prepared a common seminar presentation at the end of the course. A key component of the labs was to introduce students to the kinds of collaborative learning and group work that are hallmarks of the Environmental Studies program. This was certainly a challenge for the instructor and the TA, who had to "manage" the students' negotiation of these "simple" projects on campus. Some students complained that the groups were

Teaching and Learning at Saint Mary's

A forum on teaching and learning sponsored by the Quality of Teaching Committee and edited and produced by the Centre for Academic and Instructional Development. Articles and responses by faculty, students and staff are welcome.

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continued on page 3

sometimes too large: a group of five people left each individual with too little to do; other students wanted more instruction on how to actually work in groups: "When you have a lot of first year students in a class I find most of them aren't familiar with project planning. It may sound a bit "childish" but during your consultations with the groups it may be helpful to the students to ask them about allocating the workload. Not all groups will have a "leader" and could use some advice in helping to find their strengths when dividing the workload. That was more or less what I ended up doing with my group."

The third anchor of the course was an introduction to as many people representing disciplines relevant to Environmental Studies as possible. I invited over 20 guests to give lectures or help out in the labs and the students appeared to like this approach. Many students emphasized the diversity of guest lecturers as a highlight of the course. For the most part, I asked the guests to present their personal take on their discipline as it relates to environmental issues. My challenge as the instructor was to try to integrate what the guest lecturers brought to the course with the rest of the course material. I was trying to convey

the students the idea that there are many resources out there for tackling environmental challenges, and that Saint Mary's is home to a huge base of expertise in this area (beyond the relatively small Environmental Studies Program itself). While it is too early to tell if this course will make an impact on enrolment in Environmental Studies, student feedback was largely positive and the course will be offered again in fall 2008. I can conclude that the First Year Seminar concept makes sense for Environmental Studies at Saint Mary's, but I have lots of improvements to make for the next version.

The Roving Reporter asks students about technology in the classroom ...

Clickers in the classroom: do they help students learn better?



Large classes tend to inhibit shy students from asking or answering questions. My experience with clickers is very positive, since I am the shy student who doesn't like to talk

in front of large groups. I can identify my "weak" areas without feeling humiliated if I get the answer wrong. Clickers give me a sense of how well I understand the material relayed by the professor and I find out which areas that I need to go over in further detail before midterms and exams. In physics, the questions asked also help the professor determine if students understand the material taught, and a good professor acknowledges areas that he may need to revisit.

Clickers also help to break up the lectures, a style that can cause students to drift off and possibly sleep. We've all seen that happen, but sometimes a little twist in the normal routine helps students stay focused. Many large classes don't have a chance to break into groups, yet clickers give us that opportunity. They are easy to use and provide direct feedback for both the student and the professors. Clickers can also help in taking attendance and can be used for participation points. For the student this is an incentive and can mean the difference between a B+ and an A-. Clickers can be on the expensive side; however, if you make participation points worth it, there will be no complaints. Also, the more clickers are used, the less the student has to pay. Once a student pays for the activation fee for three

semesters, or three classes, there are no further costs for future courses using clickers.

As a student who has used clickers in a few of my classes, I would highly recommend them to any faculty member who is uncertain about introducing them. If you're finding that too many students are drifting, why not give the clickers a try - it might help keep them stimulated.

Megan Boucher
4th Year Biology

Do you think that Facebook in the classroom is a good learning tool?



Facebook is a craze that has swept the nation but it has yet to touch my education and I wish to keep it that way. Facebook is a social network - it is how you connect with friends, meet new people, and generally unwind from school. If our professors use Facebook to give us information, it will make checking Facebook seem like work and something we must do every day instead of just when we feel like it. I do not want to see Facebook turn into a chore. Another big reason I am against my professors using Facebook is because doing so takes responsibility off the students. We already have in place many ways for our professors to contact us and give us information - SMUport, SMU email and WebCT. People use the argument that no one checks these resources so they miss information, but that is no excuse. We are in university and adults, as we keep telling our parents, so it is time to

be responsible and use the tools Saint Mary's has provided us with. It is for these two reasons that I am strongly against the use of Facebook in courses.

Cody Doucette
1st year, Faculty of Arts

I do not think that it is a bad idea for professors to have Facebook groups. It could be optional for you to add your professor as a friend, or for you to join the group. If you are concerned about the contents of your profile and afraid your professor might stumble on pictures of you at the Palace on Saturday night, don't put them up, or adjust how much of your profile that your professor and your group are permitted to see. Facebook seems to be more popular than SMUport, so that there might be a faster "turn around time" than with other course communication tools because students tend to use it more. For example, if a professor posted a discussion or a question, it would be more likely that the student would see it and respond. Personally speaking, I rarely check the discussion board on our class page.

Amanda Boulegon
2nd year, Faculty of Arts

A good reason for having Facebook is that it opens up more communication channels. Although some may argue that too many channels are overwhelming, the more channels, the greater the chance to reach more people.

Matt Manning
3rd year, Sobey School of Business

12th Dalhousie Conference on University Teaching and Learning

Assessing Student Learning Where Motivation, Learning and Evaluation Intersect: April 30 – May 1, 2008

Faculty, graduate students, academic administrators and educational developers are invited to participate in a conference that will focus on how university and college faculty in a diverse range of disciplines strike this balance in their work with students.

Keynote speakers include:

- **L. Dee Fink**, a national and international consultant in higher education. In 2004-2005 he was president of the POD [Professional & Organizational Development] Network in Higher Education, the largest faculty development organization in the world. In 2003 he published *“Creating Significant Learning Experiences”**
- **Pierre Zundel**: Dean, Renaissance College, UNB and UNB's first University Teaching Professor in 2001. In 2002 he received the Atlantic Association of Universities' Educational Leadership Award, and in 2003 he was made a *3M National Teaching Fellow*. In 2006 he led a team at Renaissance College that received the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) *Alan K Blizzard Award* for Collaborative Teaching.

• AAU Award

Winners: A panel presentation featuring Association of Atlantic Universities award winners including Saint Mary's professor, *Edna Keeble*, recipient of the 2007 AAU Distinguished Teacher Award.



For further information and for registration details, visit the Dalhousie website at <http://learningandteaching.dal.ca/dcutl/>.

The Quality of Teaching Committee will reimburse the registration fee for Saint Mary's full and part-time faculty on submission of receipt following the conference.

Pre-conference Symposium
April 29th, 2008: 11:00am to 4:00pm
Clicker Talk: Engaging Students?
Saint Mary's University

Clicker Talk: Engaging Students?

Saint Mary's University
Sobey Building, Xerox Case Study
Theatre, Room 255

April 29th, 2008; 11:00am - 4:00pm

A Regional Symposium on the use of wireless responders (clickers) in the classroom.

Keynote speaker:

Douglas Duncan (University of Colorado)
Author of *Clickers in the Classroom*

Six Years, 10,000 Clickers - What Have We Learned?*

Wireless student response systems, "clickers", have been in use at the University of Colorado for 6 years. As of fall 2007, 10,000 students were using them in 80 classes.

Dr. Duncan will present results that show the effects on student and faculty attitudes, student learning, and how these depend on how clickers are used. This will be an interactive session.



Following lunch (provided), colleagues from across the region will offer their perspectives on clicker use in various disciplines in Arts, Science, and Business, including use by university administrators. The afternoon will conclude with technical tips, issues and research on student satisfaction with the technology.

Refreshments will be provided throughout the day, beginning at 10:30am. Registration is required, but is free of charge. To register, or for more information, contact the CAID: 420-5088, caid@smu.ca.

www.smu.ca/administration/caid/events.html

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

Still time to 'engage'...

A substantial number of randomly selected first year and graduating students were contacted through their SMU email in late February and invited to complete the NSSE. These same students have now received three follow-up reminders, with the final reminder scheduled to be sent on April 2. Students will have access to the survey until late April.

Help increase Saint Mary's response rate by reminding your students to 'check their SMU email' and complete the survey!

And participate yourself...

Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE)

If you were contacted and given access to the survey, we hope you too will 'engage'... FSSE will also be available until late April.

If you wish to discuss the NSSE/FSSE project, or if you have questions, please contact Margaret-Anne Bennett, CAID, at margaret-anne.bennett@smu.ca or call 420-5087.

Is Today's Student Different?

Roxanne Richardson, Instructional Development Associate,
Centre for Academic and Instructional Development

This year, the McGraw-Hill Ryerson's Canadian Colleges and Universities Conference, hosted by Carleton University, was entitled "First Year in Focus". Max Valiquette, one of the keynote speakers at the conference, is Canada's foremost expert on youth culture and marketing. He is founder and President of Youthography, Canada's leading youth marketing consultancy, and he was recently named one of Canada's most influential marketers by Marketing Magazine. He is also the host of TVOntario's *VoxTalk*, a talk show that tackles youth issues of the day. Valiquette's humorous and insightful keynote presentation provided us with valuable insights on the challenges of successfully communicating with the youth generation of today.

Are today's youth really any different than their predecessors? According to Max Valiquette, the average young person today has attitudes, personalities, and opportunities unlike any previous generation. It should therefore not be surprising that many identify the current generation gap as the biggest one "since rock 'n' roll". So what makes them different?

Home offers less

With smaller families, (80% consist of one or two children households) and 60% of women working outside the home, more time is spent alone or with peers. Face-to-face contact is not considered crucial as technology allows for simultaneous interaction with many friends anywhere in the world. According to the 2006 Canadian census, the traditional family is no longer the norm and single-parent families are now at a record high of one in four families. The proximity of extended family is rare and almost 20% of Canadians are born "elsewhere".

Getting into adulthood earlier

Physically and socially our youth enter adulthood earlier than they did 25 years ago. They tend to start formal schooling earlier, enter puberty, and become sexually active up to two years earlier. Up to 27% of African American and 17% of Caucasian girls have signs of early sexual development, or precocious puberty, by their seventh year.

Getting into "full" adulthood later

The interesting point is that while youth

enter adulthood earlier, the full transition to adulthood is prolonged! A comparison with similar cohorts 25 years ago reveals that today's students graduate later (26 *vs.* 24), stay in school longer to complete postgraduate degrees, marry later (29 *vs.* 26) and have their first child later (29 *vs.* 26). Our youth are also staying home much longer. Overall in Canada, 44% of 20-29 year-olds live at home, and in large, costly cities like Montreal and Toronto, this figure approaches 55-60%.

What do the current generation of youth value most?

Surveys show that their top priorities are relationships, communications, information, empowerment, and diversity. (Young people have never known a world without diversity, and they see racial differences less.) Technology is considered to be the vital tool that sews all of their priorities together. Unlike previous generations, just about everyone under the age of 23 has *always* had access to global information. According to Valiquette, "how we communicate to get students into schools/universities/colleges in the first place is completely connected to how we communicate with them once they are here – and how they speak to teachers, administrators, their learning institutes, brands, each other, and their culture".

Change, charge, and challenge

How do we connect with today's youth? Understanding the way that this generation approaches life and culture is critical if we want to attract, engage or retain them. According to Valiquette, the three 'c's in today's youth culture are *change*, *charge*, and *challenge*.

Change: Our youth are accustomed to rapid change in forms of media, and readily adapt to, and acquire, new technologies. It took 25 years for 70% of households to have a colour TV, whereas it only took 5 years for VCRs to reach 70%. In the past six years iPods have undergone major transformations; newer versions are significantly smaller with a much wider range of capabilities. As new cell phones, laptops, and iPods appear on the market, older models are discarded. Valiquette believes that it is not that today's youth are wasteful consumers, but that they

want to be able to purchase *one* piece of technology that is capable of doing everything.

Charge: Twenty-five years ago it was easy for parents to control what children were exposed to, and how much time they spent communicating with their friends on the telephone. It was considered a great "privilege" to have an extension in your bedroom, and a parent could pick up the "other" phone at any time to terminate the conversation. Today's youth, often referred to as *digital natives*, are in charge of how they interact with communications and culture, and therefore are much more in charge of their own lives. The internet and digital culture has changed everything. We now live in a world of *culture on demand* and *communication on demand*, and there has been a control shift from creators of technology to the consumer and from adults to youth. Compared to their predecessors, the youth generation of today is much more powerful and more influential than any previous generation.

Challenge: From 1980-1996, corporations created culture and youth absorbed it. That trend has changed - now any individual has the ability to create culture, invent culture, or set trends for corporations to replicate. For example, Google was invented by two 20 year-olds, and five years ago, a 21 year-old Harvard student invented Facebook.

How should educational institutions respond?

According to Valiquette, universities need to adapt to the changing needs of students. With more choice available, it's harder to connect to youth, but they have the ability to connect to friends, work, university, and culture, whenever they want to. In order to attract, engage and retain students, we need to keep the following points in mind.

- Valiquette quoted Janon Lanier, a computer scientist and techno-cultural theorist, as saying "We already knew that kids learned computer technology more easily than adults. What we're seeing now is that they don't even need to be taught. It is

continued on page 7

Saint Mary's puts a Blackboard into classrooms...

Mark Kendall Brooks – Centre for Academic and Instructional Development



...A virtual blackboard, that is. We are pleased to announce that, effective January 2009, Blackboard Learning System CE (Campus Edition) will replace WebCT as the enriched course management system for Saint Mary's University, for both blended delivery and fully online courses.

The current version of WebCT has been in use at SMU for well over six years, and is being used to manage online content for over 240 courses. However, WebCT will no longer be supported by the parent company as of October, 2009: a dilemma that has created the opportunity for us to choose a new product which will better meet the teaching and learning needs of our faculty and students. After a thorough investigation of several available options, a committee comprised of faculty, students and staff has selected Blackboard Learning System CE.

Blackboard has many improved features that faculty will find useful, including a capability to upload multiple files, easy switches from designer to student view, an improved Gradebook, advanced communication features including learning outcomes, extensive support for group work, and new usage tracking capabilities. Most importantly, there will be many opportunities for faculty training and support! The Centre for Academic Technologies (CAT) will continue to be the training hub for faculty and staff in support of technology in teaching.

Throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 2008, we will be learning everything Blackboard! In the CAT, we will be busy creating a Blackboard Support Centre web site, identifying training content and opportunities, and building online training modules for students as well as faculty. We will set up small group training sessions and be available for one-on-one sessions as requested. Watch your email inboxes for invitations and information!

Blackboard will be managed and accessed through SMUport, just as WebCT is now, and will be fully integrated with SCT Banner. Until the switch in January 2009, faculty will continue to make course requests for WebCT, and you can continue to update your course content through SMUport and WebCT. ITSS will migrate all courses from WebCT to Blackboard before

the start of the winter 2009 semester, and the CAT TTAs will be available to help you make a smooth transition to Blackboard.

In the meantime, if you have any

questions about the new course management system, please contact Mary in the Centre for Academic and Instructional Development: caid@smu.ca, 420-5088.

Center for Academic Technologies (CAT)

Teaching Technology Associates (TTAs): Spring & Summer 2008

This year, Anuj Singh Charan will be graduating, but he won't be leaving us quite yet! Anuj has completed the requirements for his Bachelor of Science degree (Biology major), but will be staying on to help prepare for the transition to Blackboard. He has made many contributions to the CAT and the Centre for Academic and Instructional Development and we're not ready to let him leave!

Keisha Archibald is on a leave of absence until September. We miss her, and look forward to her return!

This summer our TTA team in the CAT will consist of Emile Johnson, Shane Whittaker, and Bryan Freeland, plus of course Anuj and a new trainee.

The CAT will be open and staffed full time during the spring and summer. Drop-in assistance is usually available but

an appointment will ensure help when you need it. Please call the CAT at 496-8168, email caid@smu.ca; or contact Mary in the Centre for Academic and Instructional Development at 420-5088, email caid@smu.ca to schedule an appointment.



Divorcing the "P" Drive

Dr. John Calder – Part-Time Faculty, Department of Geology

I am a bit of a self-inflicted luddite: I tend to avoid technology not out of a doctrine, rather because unless I stumble upon it, it very nicely eludes me. Course Tools is just such a case in point. As a part-time faculty member in the Science Building, I have found it a bit of a challenge to locate my desk these days let alone an onsite computer; and I found a need to ask the good folk at the CAT for advice on how I could access the network from my home. Simply by searching out Saint Mary's website, you have found the portal: cleverly called SMUport Login, at the lower left corner of the web page. Click on it, and you're on your way. The most difficult part is remembering your login number (the one that begins with 's'), and your password. Once past that hurdle – the biggest facing you - hit the 'Faculty Academic' tab at the

top of the page, then scroll down to 'My Courses' at the bottom of the next, where you will find 'Click here to access your courses' – do that and you're off to the races.

Once here, you can do all sorts of useful things for you and your class: post reminders, notices of changes, links to websites of interest, files of handouts, and so on. The 'Files' tab allows you to upload PowerPoint or lecture notes directly. The two most valuable aspects of Course Tools from my perspective as a fledgling user are that you can access SMUport from any computer, and so can your students - a great asset for any student living off campus. These are things that the good old Academic 'P' drive cannot offer. It's definitely worth a try.

Now if I could just remember to remove my flash drive from the computer

- as if children were waiting all these centuries for someone to invent their native language”.
- The internet is omnipresent and multi-tasking is the norm. Since youth are in control of technology, culture, and their lives, they do not need to be “taught” as much as they need to be “guided” in their learning. Media literacy, which is the ability to shift through and analyze information, is an educational priority that must be addressed, and Valiquette believes it needs to begin as early as age five. Instructors can no longer control all the content, but they need to teach students to become discriminating in what they access. What is right and what is not?
 - National Electronic Libraries are essential as physical branches are far too limited. With information changing so rapidly, what is the value of an “official source” any more?
 - Traditional teaching methods may not be as effective as they were for previous generations, and teaching innovations may help improve student engagement. What is the value of *knowing* (i.e., memorizing) things in an age when knowledge is immediately available at a click from the world-wide web? Students today consider memorizing facts a waste of time! Not

having access to the internet today is like not having access to a calculator 20 years ago!

- Approaches and learning are more collaborative, and students have a different definition of plagiarism because of it. It is now harder than it ever was to get students to write down their own ideas, and then to find out information to support such ideas. We need to encourage them to become more reflective in their learning, and help them become better critical thinkers.
- Convergence is a massive change from previous generations. Youth want only one or two devices that offer a two-way experience to manage all communications and culture. What does this mean to universities when the device that best delivers knowledge is also the device with the greatest number of distractions?

Many of us are *digital immigrants*, not *digital natives*, and we have a hard time understanding how students can learn while watching TV, listening to music, responding to instant messages, or regularly looking at Facebook. What we forget is that the youth of today have been practicing multi-tasking skills through all their formative years. They also expect learning to be fun, and this is not really surprising when you remember that

many were first “taught” by Sesame Street characters.

Digital immigrant teachers face many challenges in the classroom. Methods that worked well for us when we were in university will not necessarily work for our students. We wonder why they become bored by traditional lectures, but we need to remember that they thrive on multi-tasking and they are used to instant feedback. They want to learn about the subject that they are studying, but they also need to see how it is relevant to other disciplines. Many have never used a library for research purposes, and they are not aware that readily available websites are not always suitable for research papers.

What instructors should keep in mind is not to get too caught up in the technology. In much the same way that it is frequently more difficult to learn a new language when you are older, it is also much harder for some of us to catch up to the technological multi-tasking abilities of today's youth. Instead, instructors should impart their valuable expertise and experience, keeping in mind the limitations of the “traditional” classroom. Today's student does not need to be shown how to use new classroom technologies as much as they need to learn to *think critically* and to be *discriminating*.

Integrating Writing Instruction into the Classroom: My Experience with WHO

Dr. Mark L. Barr, Department of English

Arriving at Saint Mary's in the Summer of 2007 as a new faculty member in the English department, I had many things to be anxious about - a new environment, new colleagues, advancing my research agenda and, most frightening of all, the prospect of teaching English 1205, Introduction to Literature, in the Fall. As perhaps the only mandatory course for virtually all SMU students, it attracts people with, shall we say, a variety of interest levels. How would I engage them, how evaluate them and, of particular concern, would they be able to write well enough so that I could even begin to evaluate them?

I've taught writing in the past, but only in a composition course of at most twenty students, working through multiple drafts, utilizing personal conferences, running in-class workshops to highlight particular techniques and issues, implementing peer reviews and the like. These are all proven tools, but didn't all seem feasible in a class of sixty — working through four essays with



multiple drafts for each of sixty students sounds like a sure road to a nervous breakdown. However, to my mind, the issue remained: high schools aren't teaching students the fundamentals of essay writing and

they don't magically acquire these skills during the Summer break or even in the universities. How can I, within a fairly large class, give them some guidance as to what is expected in a university level essay and some practice and feedback in developing these crucial writing skills?

WHO (Writing Help Online) was the answer for me. Casting about for some solution to my conundrum, I noticed the availability of many online writing resources and tutorial systems and also noted that Saint Mary's had developed one internally. Julie-Ann Vincent at the SMU Writing Centre has put a variety of materials online (WHO) to help guide students through the writing process. Divided into separate tutorial areas for Arts, Science and Business, each area gives pithy instruction on a relevant aspect of writing (e.g. thesis statements, introductory

continued on page 8

paragraphs, transitions). Each information module is then backed up by a quiz (that can be taken multiple times until “passed”) to reinforce the lesson. Particularly interesting is the fact that students are then often given a further opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills by writing (e.g.) a thesis statement or introductory paragraph that Writing Centre staff will evaluate and critique. All of this is done online (predictably) through a WHO “Course” that students can add via Banner.

I feel that WHO very much helped my Fall-term students come to understand what a university level essay was and substantially assisted in developing their writing skills. Since I thought making WHO a voluntary aspect of the course was a mistake (likely to be ignored) I made the completion of the instruction and quiz segments of selected modules mandatory and part of the course grade (5%). I also devoted some course time to writing workshops, bringing WHO into the classroom itself. For example, I asked students to complete levels one and two of the “Introductions” module (Arts section) and then, instead of having them complete level 3 (the introductory paragraph for Writing Centre feedback) had them write an introduction to a hypothetical essay on a short story we were discussing and bring that in for peer feedback the next day. This is just one of a variety of ways to integrate WHO into the classroom, but the results for my students have been positive.

There were initially some technical problems with the program (now resolved), but informal conversations with students indicated they felt the material, format and reinforcement techniques in WHO were extremely useful - many felt they’d never had anyone break down for them the components of successful writing and that they had become much more effective writers as a result. Their final essays seemed to bear this out, although admittedly (being new here) I don’t have any true basis for comparison.

In short, I strongly recommend that you investigate what WHO is and how you might integrate it into your own classroom. If the inability of students to write is a crisis in higher education, we should all try to do something about it. If you’re looking for assistance in this endeavour, WHO might also be the answer for you.



CAID Q & A

Do you have a question related to teaching or teaching support We invite you to send your questions to Teaching & Learning at Saint Mary’s.

Individuals in my department do not work well together and frequently, animosity seems to dominate departmental meetings. The atmosphere is negatively affecting many faculty, students and support staff. What can be done to try to establish more collegial relationships?

The good news is that conflict is both normal and inevitable when human beings live and work together. Problems arise when conflict is managed ineffectively. Unfortunately one of the most ineffective ways to manage conflict is to ignore it and this may well be part of the issue within your department.

There is no question that departmental meetings dominated by animosity create an atmosphere that is both negative and destructive in a variety of ways. There is often a complex history behind issues in dispute that will require time and attention in order to obtain a better understanding of the situation. Once this understanding is achieved it can allow for specific interventions like mediation or facilitated discussions to take place that will in turn serve to repair damaged relationships.

I would suggest that you first speak in confidence with the Chairperson to convey your concerns and further to see if there is a willingness on their part to try and address the conflict within the department. If you are uncomfortable speaking with the Chairperson, you can consult with the Conflict Resolution Advisor in confidence to discuss the situation and explore possibilities on how best to proceed. No steps will be taken and your identity will not be revealed without your express permission.

Bridget Brownlow
Conflict Resolution Advisor
Room 416 Student Centre
420-5113

Why can't the Writing Centre proofread my students' work?

The Writing Centre’s tutoring services are peer-mediated sessions designed to help students develop their writing skills. If students came to the Centre to have their work edited, then they would not learn how to improve their skills. So, rather than simply proofreading, we work with students on all areas of their papers: structure, argumentation, incorporation of research, organization, grammar, and punctuation. We help them to understand their own strengths and weaknesses instead of simply fixing their papers for them. For example, a typical tutoring discussion takes the form of questions – rather than pointing out a sentence fragment and telling the student how to correct it, we will explain what is wrong with the sentence and ask the student how he or she can fix it. If the student doesn’t know, then we will help them work through the problem. The idea is that eventually the student will start to identify those errors on their own. So we try to help students to develop skills instead of making them reliant on the centre. For this reason, we ask that faculty members not ask their students to go to the Writing Centre to get their papers proofread. We would rather that you recommend that they come to get help with their overall writing instead; this may eliminate some points of confusion that students have about our services.

Julie-Ann Vincent
Director of the Writing Centre,
Burke Building 115,
491-6201

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