

# TEACHING & LEARNING

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## Implementing a Teaching Assistant Training Program for Promoting Student Learning

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Department of Psychology

In step with the growing size and research profile of Saint Mary's University, it is generally the case that, over the years, undergraduate course offerings have proliferated. With the exception of the current year, the large sizes of some classes also reflect our growth. By way of a specific example, in the Department of Psychology it is commonplace for faculty to face first, second, and third-year classes of 100 – 250 students. How can professors accomplish the worthwhile pedagogical goals of engaging students and providing them with feedback on assignments, papers, and tests, when the ratio of students to faculty is high?

We believe Teaching Assistants can provide a partial solution. Past research shows they are effective instructors (White & Kolber, 1978) and learn valuable skills through their role (Fremouw, Millard, & Donahoe, 1979).

This is particularly true for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), as successful scholars training for a career in higher education (Bernassi & Fernald, 1993). Undergraduate Teaching Assistants (UTAs) provide a particular challenge. They are peers of the students they tutor, more novice in the subject matter, not necessarily heading toward a teaching career, and there is a larger power differential between themselves and the supervising professor.

### Development of a TA Training Program

Because UTAs have recently learned course material themselves, they show a superior ability to break concepts down for novice learners compared to graduate TAs (White & Kolber, 1978). Yet, and perhaps surprisingly, we could not find any evidence of systematic **training** initiatives for undergraduate TAs in the literature on the scholarship of teaching in higher education.

While we see the merits in greater utilization of undergraduate TAs, we also strongly believe the development of UTAs is particularly critical. Their success and that of our students hinges on the quality of our investment in their skills development. Because our Department relies heavily on UTAs, we

formed a committee in 2005 to develop a training program for undergraduate teaching assistants that would promote a culture of scholarship and maximize their skills and contributions. We saw the value of providing UTAs with active and suitable mentoring, consisting of structured supervision and feedback (Boeding & Vattano, 1976; White & Kolber, 1978; Fremouw, et al., 1979).

### Training Goals

In an effort to foster teaching assistant development, we established the broad goal of providing a supportive training initiative geared towards undergraduates. In particular we aimed to:

1. Develop and enhance their ability to evaluate the work of peers;
2. Aid in the development of organizational skills;
3. Identify and declare boundaries between students and professors; and
4. Improve time management and effective communication.

### Components of Our Initiative

I A TA Manual: This manual included the duties, expectations, and logistics of the TA role (Vulcano, & Gilin, 2006; Vulcano, 2005)

II A half-day training session. Activities included:



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- An icebreaker exercise;
- Information about payroll and test supplies;
- An overview and “quiz” on the training manual;
- A training exercise in marking students’ written work;
- A “Sticky Situations” role play exercise (covering boundaries/ communication);
- An open question and answer period
- Review of a Checklist to help the TA work well with her/his professor; and
- Extending continued support via our department’s TA Coordinator.

To illustrate the training session, we used a “Sticky Situations” exercise: Students were presented with a common difficult interpersonal



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situation associated with entry-level TA jobs. Issues were identified and discussed, including relationships with students, professionalism, harassment, students angry about grades, and time management for marking. A variety of solutions were generated from the trainees, including experienced TAs. It was pointed out that professors can provide additional options.

### Reactions to the Training Initiative

Along the way we undertook efforts to monitor and evaluate the TA training initiative. Departmental colleagues were included in our efforts to create a training program for TAs. Their responses have been quite favourable and positive. In addition, post-training surveys from the TAs have been overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the TAs’ enjoyment of the interactive role plays, marking essays, and learning about strategies for managing relationships with students and professors.

We also undertook a follow-up evaluation subsequent to the training provided in the 2005-2006 academic year. We asked TAs completing their first year whether there were “any roles encountered in the job that were not mentioned in training?” While only six (of 41) completed the survey, five said there were no major roles for which they were unprepared after the training. One TA mentioned that there was insufficient coverage of lab instruction. Other feedback included:

- *Difficulties Encountered:* “Difficult” students, professor changing my marks when students complained, being asked to make marking key for tests, and time management (marking).
- *Best Parts of the Job:* Getting to know professors, teaching other students/ helping them learn, pay, and experience/ knowledge gained.

In 2006-2007 we are continuing the training, utilizing the TA Checklist, and providing information to students interested in the TA experience. We are developing an improved means of gathering follow-up information since the past end-of-year evaluation survey (n=6) provided limited feedback. To-date, 66 teaching assistants have participated in our training program. We look forward to training many more!

### Conclusions

In part, our department began this work out of a genuine concern: as course enrolments increase and more undergraduate TAs are employed, there is a potential for suboptimal learning for both the enrolled students and for the teaching assistants. Based on feedback from instructors and the TAs (both undergraduate and graduate) throughout the year, the initial training of undergraduate TAs for entry level TA-ships was successful. Specifically, reportedly, TAs are better prepared, they said that the training helped faculty members “save time,” and we believe the mentorship of the role may have increased. We concluded this type of teaching assistantship is a win-win opportunity for students and faculty.

We see the undergraduate TA training project as one that could extend to the larger university community. We see TA training and development as a viable means for departments seeking solutions to the growing challenges and demands placed on the professoriate, and in particular, but not limited to, the demands of large enrolment courses.

### Notes:

1. This article is based on Gilin, D., Vulcano, B., & Fisher, M. (2006). **Implementing a Teaching Assistant Training Programme for Promoting Student Learning.** Presentation at the 10th Annual Dalhousie Conference on University Teaching and Learning, Halifax, Canada.
2. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Saint Mary’s University Quality of Teaching Committee, the Dean of Science, and the Department of Psychology, which made this project a reality.
3. Those interested in obtaining copies of any of the materials we have developed are welcome to contact either Debra Gilin at dgilin@smu.ca (491-6211) or Brent Vulcano at brent.vulcano@smu.ca (420-5851).
4. We acknowledge the contributions of Ms. Kelly Sabourin, an Honours student in Psychology, who worked as our assistant and student facilitator (“TA Coordinator”) for the 2005- 2006 year.

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## 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 Office of Instructional Development. Articles and responses by faculty, students and staff are welcome.

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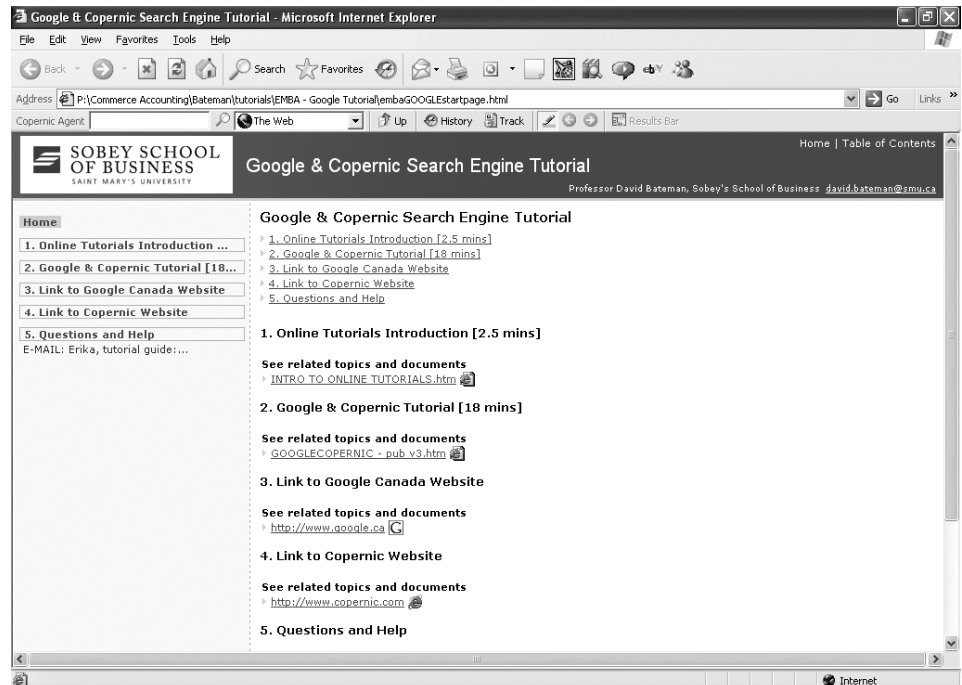
# Making Digital Movies to Enhance Student Learning: Look out Woody Allen, here we come.

David Bateman, Accounting & Management Information Systems

The purpose of this article is to report on my pilot experiences in making digital educational movies (using screencasting software) to encourage and improve student learning and teaching effectiveness. In the summer of 2006, with the aid of an Instructional Development Grant from the Quality of Teaching Committee, I worked with a student assistant to develop online electronic teaching tutorials (digital movies) to supplement topics taught in my summer MIS classes (for examples, see P:\Commerce Accounting\Bateman\tutorials). The preliminary results from student surveys regarding satisfaction levels have been very good, with class satisfaction levels (measured as a good use of their time) at over 90%. I believe that the supported use of screencasting technology (by the Office of Instructional Development) would provide Saint Mary's faculty with an opportunity to re-examine what and how we teach.

The major impetus for this project came from my direct observation of changing student learning attitudes, propensities and lifestyles as exhibited by my students as well as my three teenage children. Today's university students are much different than days gone by. They have lived most of their lives with the pervasive influence of multi-media products and the Internet as a given. They are used to receiving and digesting information in their day-to-day lives that has been parsed, packaged and delivered using available digital technologies and available to them when and where they want it. The information explosion has made the challenge of knowledge and information transfer a frustrating and demanding task for both faculty and students. To help cope with this changing landscape, faculty and students need to look at multi-media educational products (online tutorials, videos, pod casts, interactive web sites, instant messaging, blogging, etc.) as important complimentary educational tools to help smooth the road to more effective teaching and learning.

The technology of screencasting is not new and was previously known as screen capturing software. Udell (2005) defines a screencast as "...a digital movie in which the setting is partly or wholly a computer screen and in which audio narration describes or explains the story of the onscreen action".<sup>1</sup> In this pilot we used a product called



Captivate by Adobe (see <http://www.adobe.com/products/captivate/> for detailed description and trial download information). Recent advances in the sophistication of available screencasting software tools such as Captivate, its relative ease of use, ease of editing and affordability make its use in a wide range of educational settings much more attractive.

I used the online tutorials (movies) to supplement/replace/compliment what would have been in-class short demonstrations or out of class unstructured walk through activities, neither of which proved to be as effective in capturing student interest, increasing engagement and aiding in the retention of key concepts. Students were given a digital tutorial-guided tour of research tools or websites which required student interaction to complete. Tutorials were kept short (less than 20 minutes – ideally they should be shorter) with opportunities to redo or review in whole or in part. Students knew they would have to use the concepts/skills learned in the tutorials for later course activities and they found the tutorials easy to use and a very positive learning experience.

The use of screencasting technology to create online (short) tutorials has wide spread application across Saint Mary's campus. The need for explanatory tutorials exist in all disciplines and faculties. Their use at Saint Mary's University should free up class time

and instructor time for more productive learning activities, in addition to providing students with specific help and instruction when and where they need it (just before applying it). Online tutorials (digital movies) can be built which support concept development or skill development. These tutorials will be particularly helpful for students where concepts taught in earlier courses are extended in upper level courses and students need a quick refresher before they can move on to apply or develop higher level concepts. In addition, they are particularly useful in demonstrating navigation through software programs user interfaces and navigation through complex websites.

Based on my experiences with this, I feel the supported use of screencasting technologies would enhance the learning environment for our students and would provide Saint Mary's faculty with an innovative tool to increase their effectiveness as teachers.

*David Bateman presented on this project at the AAU Teaching Showcase at Memorial University on Saturday, October 28th, 2006.*

1. <http://digitalmedia.oreilly.com/lpt/a/6119> viewed on July 26, 2006-10-12

# Center for Academic Technologies (CAT): Changes & Challenges

Mary Kendall Brooks, Office of Instructional Development

SMUport? Course Tools? Clickers? Saint Mary's has made a number of changes recently, and the Teaching Technology Associates (TTA's) in the CAT are ready to help faculty and faculty support staff sort out the terminologies and technologies. Whether it's Course Tools or WebCT in support of on campus courses, CPS clickers in the classroom, or using SMUport Calendar and Group Tools to plan meetings and events, the TTA's can assist you by offering training and support in the use of technology in teaching and learning. They can work with you in your office, at your own computer, or in the CAT for one-on-one or small group instructional sessions.

In addition to hands-on training, the CAT also provides access to equipment and software. Digital cameras (video and stills) are available to faculty on a sign-out basis, and we offer in-lab use of our multi-purpose scanners and video capture software, as well as other specialized hardware, software and peripherals not readily available elsewhere on campus.

## New Service in the CAT

As part of the new Instructor/Course Evaluation (ICE) system, an optical read scanner was purchased to read the bubble sheets. This machine is housed in The Center for Academic Technologies where completed forms will be scanned during evaluation week each semester. During this process, the CAT will be closed to visitors however TTA's will be available to provide assistance outside the CAT. It is hoped that, after the first full year of implementation of the new evaluation system (2006-07), we will be in a position to offer optical scanning services to the campus community. See <http://www.smu.ca/administration/oid/ice.html> for more information.

The CAT is open during regular university hours. We welcome your questions, comments and suggestions on ways to improve or enhance our services. More information is available on our web page: [www.smu.ca/administration/oid/academic.html](http://www.smu.ca/administration/oid/academic.html)

Our TTA's are friendly, knowledgeable and talented, but they all are SMU students, and eventually they complete their degrees



CAT Teaching Technology Associates: (l to r) Vagarro Willie, Keisha Archibald, Anuj Singh Charan, Aaron Muise

and move on. Vagarro Willie, an international student from Saint Lucia, has been with the CAT since July, 2001. In January, 2007 he will be moving to Waterloo, Ontario and a full time position with Research in Motion (RIM). Vagarro is completing his Bachelor of Science degree (with the Cooperative Education option), with majors in both Computing Science and Business Administration and a minor in Psychology, as well as his Bachelor of Commerce with a major in Computing and Information Systems. We wish to acknowledge his many contributions to the CAT and the Office of Instructional Development and wish him all

the best as he leaves Saint Mary's for an exciting career in his chosen field.

Joining Keisha and Anuj in the CAT is Aaron Muise, a 4th year Bachelor of Commerce student (majoring in Computing and Information Systems and Human Resource Management). Aaron has a strong interest in training and professional development, and is a welcome addition to our team.

Drop-in assistance in the CAT is usually available but an appointment will assure help when you need it. Please call the CAT at 496-8168, email [cat@smu.ca](mailto:cat@smu.ca); or contact Mary in the Office of Instructional Development at 420-5088, email [oid@smu.ca](mailto:oid@smu.ca).

## Thinking of CLICKERS in your class

### ...Adam Sarty suggests

- First ask yourself 'why' you want to use clickers – determine what you are trying to accomplish pedagogically - before you focus on the 'how to'.
- Make sure you are comfortable using the classroom PC and the data projector.
- Use multiple-choice questions to see what students know about a topic both before you cover it, and after ... then let the students' answers guide your lecture (e.g. cover quickly if they already "get it" beforehand, or go back and re-discuss if they don't seem to "get it" at the end!).
- Have some portion of student responses "scored" as a Class Participation component of your course – this makes the a \$30 investment by the students worthwhile from their view, but don't make it worth too much since it might encourage unwanted "clicker

sharing" (I like to have 5% of the course grade devoted to "clicking in".)

- Make sure students know exactly when their responses are "scored" and when they are not, and how they are scored (e.g. points for answering, or only if the answer is correct?)
- Try to avoid having every class feel like a test.

Google "clickers in the classroom" and you will locate many sites covering a great deal of technical and pedagogical information. Information on the web page at Vanderbilt's Center for Teaching provides some very clear, well-written information on the 'why' and the 'how': [http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching\\_resources/technology/crs.htm#teaching](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching_resources/technology/crs.htm#teaching)

# Three Hours in St. John's, Discovering Bonds

Edna Keeble  
Department of Political Science

Have you ever thought: "Is it me?" It is mid-semester, or mid-year, in teaching your course and there is a group of students whom you simply cannot reach. They rarely attend class; they do not prepare or do the readings; they do not hand in all the assignments or take all the exams; and what they do hand in ends up with a failing mark. Usually, they end up withdrawing, barely passing, or failing the course. I call them my "untalented and unmotivated students." At an Association of Atlantic Universities' (AAU) retreat for teaching award winners on Friday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006 at Memorial University in St. John's, I stated that I essentially "write these students off."

I swear I heard a collective gasp. I sensed that I had said something wrong. I know that I felt unsettled, unsure and (without a doubt) unworthy. Do self-proclaimed dedicated teachers, let alone those publicly recognized for their dedication, commitment and passion for teaching, write students off?

As we all know, the words that we use, the vocabulary that we choose, the discourse that we embrace to make sense of our realities profoundly affect our views, our attitudes and our behaviour.

For my presentation at the AAU Teaching Showcase on Saturday, October 28<sup>th</sup>, I had developed a 2x2 matrix to categorize my students based on the intersections of what I consider two predictors of academic success: talent and motivation. In my mind, I have four groups of students, particularly at the introductory level. These students are:

- talented and motivated
- talented but unmotivated
- untalented but motivated; and
- untalented and unmotivated.

I argued that there were good grounds to apportion extra time and effort to the first three groups, but not the last group, until they were ready to take their work seriously. Apart from ensuring that I offer a course to them as I do to all students, I do not give them additional attention. I have reasoned that if these students do not take responsibility for their learning, why should I give them any more of my time?

My reasoning is sound, isn't it? I am talking about *additional* time, time outside of the classroom as reflected in proactively counseling students during office hours or provid-

ing detailed feedback on assignments. I always keep in mind the balance that I need to achieve not only between my teaching, research and service responsibilities, but also between my academic and personal life, thus dictating limits to what I can do outside of the classroom for my students. I reason that I am busy, and if I am going to give additional time to students, should I not give it to the most deserving? Those who do not deserve it, I write off.

The teaching retreat on Friday was three hours long. I listened and I participated. I heard stories; I learned strategies; I acquired knowledge. Students arrive in our classrooms with different challenges. For some, learning comes easy and what a joy they are to have in the classroom: they are talented and motivated. For others, learning can come easy if they feel a connection to, or some relevance of, their coursework to their lives: they are talented but (initially) unmotivated. Still, for others, learning will come easy if they are given ample opportunities to improve their skills and receive detailed feedback: they are (initially) untalented but motivated. Finally, for others, learning is tough, and although there might indeed be good reason to place the responsibility solely on their shoulders, there will be some of them whose situations

are not of their own doing. They may only appear to be untalented and unmotivated when perhaps they are neither, or simply one or the other, which to me means that they belong to one of the first three groups that I outlined. What reason would I have to write any of them off, particularly if they are my first year students?

This is what I learned from a room filled with articulate, passionate, dedicated, award-winning, incredibly smart scholars all committed to teaching. During the retreat, the words that informed me, the vocabulary that educated me, the discourse that enveloped me were drawn from such a breadth and wealth of experience and filled with such a fundamental love for teaching that I felt that I had discovered bonds with a group of students with whom I thought I had none. What an amazing way to spend three hours in St. John's.

*Dr. Edna Keeble is the recipient of the 2006 Father Stewart Medal for Teaching. Each year, the winner of the Father Stewart award is Saint Mary's representative at the annual AAU Teaching Retreat, held in conjunction with the AAU's Annual Teaching Showcase. Next year's Teaching Showcase will be held at Acadia University on October 20, 2007.*

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# The Classroom Discussion Problem: Talkers and Listeners

Mano Singham, Case Western Reserve University

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When running seminar or discussion classes for undergraduates, the major issue instructors face is unbalanced participation, with some students dominating the discussion while others remain silent. While there are ways to *force* more widespread participation (such as calling upon people, basing grades on participation, using tokens, allowing people to speak only a limited number of times, etc.), all these techniques involve coercion to a greater or lesser degree. They run counter to the basic idea of the seminar/discussion as a continuing conversation, similar to the ones that one might have with friends and neighbors. One cannot imagine using coercion there.

## No Coercion

Since my own teaching philosophy has evolved to the point where I believe that the best learning occurs under conditions that aren't coercive, I tried a promising experiment this semester that focused on improving discussion without coercion. The course was on the "Evolution of Scientific Ideas." The class was comprised of 17 sophomore students. At the beginning of the very first meeting, after brief introductions all around, I spoke for a few minutes, saying that the class would function best if everyone participated in the discussions. Of course, all instructors say this, and it usually has little effect.

But then I said that in semi-formal groups such as this, each one of us had, over time, developed a preferred, or at least customary, role. We saw ourselves as either "talkers" (people who volunteered to speak and did so frequently) or "listeners" (people who preferred to stay silent and rarely, if ever, joined in the discussion unasked). I asked each person to self-identify, with me beginning and identifying myself as a talker. (This should be no surprise. McKeachie reports that the most common cause of unbalanced discussion is the instructor who typically talks about 70-80% of the time!)



... the major issue instructors face is unbalanced participation, with some students dominating the discussion while others remain silent." Photo: kclark photography

## Which Are You?

Six students identified themselves as talkers, while eleven said they were listeners. I then said that both talking and listening were essential skills and that we needed to develop both aspects of our personalities. I then asked all the talkers to sit together in one part of the room, the listeners to group in another part, and to discuss amongst themselves the following questions: What made me become a talker (listener)? How can I develop my listening (talking) skills? How can I help listeners (talkers) talk (listen) more?

The two groups spent about 20 minutes discussing these questions. The talkers group (which I naturally joined), although half the size of the listeners, made much more noise, talking and laughing as they discussed, with people jumping in with ideas and comments. The listeners group was much quieter, with only one person speaking at a time, but even there the conversation never died down. The two groups then reported to each other at the end of the time period.

## Listener Characteristics

The listeners said they listened and did not talk much because they felt that their ideas must already be obvious to everyone; that there was usually no pause in the discussion for them to insert their ideas; they liked to take in information; they took time to formulate their ideas and by the time that happened the discussion had moved on to something else; they did not feel themselves to be experts and did not want to waste other people's time with their unformed or poorly articulated views. To overcome these feelings, they felt that they should force themselves to talk more.

## Talker Characteristics

On the other hand, the talkers said that they felt compelled to share whatever ideas they had; that they thought their ideas were good; felt compelled to correct ideas they believed were wrong; were uncomfortable with silence and felt obligated to break it; and sometimes

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felt they would explode if they kept silent. They also said that this behavior had developed over years as they realized that they liked the attention talkers received, they were noticed in class by teachers and hence did better, and were often expected by teachers to respond to questions. To overcome this, they felt they should force themselves to listen.

An important realization by the listeners was that the talkers did not need to think their ideas had to be very original or carefully phrased before they expressed them. Talkers said they often thought things through while they talked, rather than before. Listeners realized that their own ideas were not inferior to those of the talkers. In their private journals to me for that first week, students said they were totally surprised by the exercise, but that they enjoyed it because they had never before thought carefully about why they adopted their particular roles.

The whole class felt that we should try and create the conditions under which everyone got to participate. It was agreed that this responsibility should be shared and that the instructor should not have to play the role of

arbitrator or be the focal point of the discussion. The class as a whole would try to develop good seminar skills as we went along, monitoring the discussions so that they were not dominated by a few people.

### Silent Running

I was apprehensive as to how this early discussion would influence subsequent classes. The next few classes were not promising, with low levels of participation and discussion.

But what I then learned from their journals was that a few of the talkers (who are the kinds of students who keep discussions going) had decided to take a vow of complete silence in order not to dominate the discussions and to allow space for the listeners! They said they felt discouraged that the listeners had not immediately picked up the slack. I replied that they had to be patient, and that it is much harder for a listener to talk than for a talker to decide to listen. I suggested that they strive for a balance between domination and silence.

### Conversation

The discussions got much better as the semester progressed, with the distinction between the talkers and listeners getting blurred but not eliminated. Almost all the listeners seemed to feel much more at ease in speaking and one or two of them even started talking to such an extent that they were accused (in good humor) of having “crossed over” to the talkers.

In a review discussion at the end of the semester, students said that this initial discussion had had a major impact on how they viewed their role in the seminar. It had made them more self-reflective and conscious of how their actions influenced that of others. They wished that it would be done in other classes as well.

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## Mid-Semester Feedback: One Professor's Experience

Shelley Tulloch

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It's that time of the year again - when I head to class with a pile of mid-term evaluations tucked in a folder... or without it, feeling slightly sheepish that I'm *not* doing what I know will improve my teaching and the students' course experience this semester. A seasoned professor taught me the technique when I set off from Laval, my graduate institution, to start teaching, emphasizing that she *still* did mid-semester evaluations, and considered them her saving grace. Mid-semester feedback is premised on the belief that students have a good understanding of what helps them learn, what they want to learn and how, and that, given the opportunity to share them, their perspectives can help professors shape courses tailored to each class. The process invites students to engage in the learning experience and to make recommendations about how to improve it.

### Process

Anywhere from the fourth week of class to the eighth (the earlier the better, I think), I photocopy a sheet of paper with three questions:

- What are you finding positive about the course?
- What are you finding negative about the course?

- What would you like to see changed in the course?

I distribute it five or ten minutes before the end of class, instructing students to comment on absolutely any aspect of the course and not to put their names on the sheets. I explain that I see the class as a collaborative activity, and that they know how they learn and what is effective for them better than I do, and that their input will help make this class as good as it possibly can be for them. I collect these anonymous forms, and return to my office, palms sweating. (Sometimes I've even returned to my office without distributing the forms, waiting for “a better day”).

In my office, I go through the feedback forms, recording the essence of each comment and the number of people who said it.

At the next class, I thank the students for their comments, assure them how much I appreciate their honesty and thoughtfulness about the course, and emphasize how helpful it was to me. I then summarize their comments as follows:

- What seems to be going well (e.g. “Students are generally finding the material interesting.”)

- Which of their concerns I am unwilling or unable to change, and why (e.g. “Students are concerned that there's no final exam. The syllabus is a contract between professors and students that I can't change at this point, but will reconsider next year.”)

- What concerns I can change and how I will change it (e.g. “Some students find the assignment questions unclear. I'll go over the assignment questions in class each week before the assignment is due.”)

I finish by soliciting their help to ensure the change takes place (e.g. wave your arms when I start going too quickly; come tell me if...etc.).

### The Good

I am always nerve-racked before doing this and while the students are filling out the forms, but then I am pleasantly surprised when I read the results – even in classes that don't appear to be going well. Comments on the positive aspects help me to determine what to keep on doing. Comments like “I love the discussions” reassure me that a particular teaching approach is working and well-received. Comments on topics that the students especially enjoy help me to know what to keep in the curriculum.

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# New Faculty Orientation: Tuesday, August 30, 2006



Margaret-Anne Bennett, OID, and Dr. Terry Murphy, Vice President, Academic & Research with New Faculty members enjoying a presentation by Dr. Kevin Vessey, Dean of Graduate Studies & Research.

## Mid-Semester Feedback: One Professor's Experience (continued from page 7)

### The Bad

Reading the positive comments braces me for the negatives. I may be boring, but that's easier to take after others have said I'm enthusiastic and passionate about my fascinating subject. Students' criticism has usually been constructive (although I do have a few "funny" comments from my 150 student intro class that I can only laugh at).

### The Changes

Generally I've found that students are realistic in their negative comments and very helpful in their suggestions. For example, in my first year teaching intro, students told me I talked too fast. I told them I'd talk more slowly. In the same class, they were overwhelmed by PowerPoint slides that presented information 'all at once'; they asked me to make one sentence appear at a time – again, a very easy thing to change. They also asked me to make my slides available on WebCT which helped class flow.

Another example comes from my "Linguistic Anthropology" course, where many assignments were linguistic analysis straight from the textbook. Students told me that the wording of the questions was awkward; or that they didn't know what I was looking for; or that I was a picky marker. In response, I started giving them practice exercises. I then used these exercises in the lectures as examples and I put what I would consider a perfect answer on the overhead. Students then had an opportunity to see exactly how a certain type of question should be answered before the actual assignment was due. This helped them feel secure with the assignments and proved to be an effective teaching tool.

### Objections to Mid-Semester Feedback

We all have reasons *not* to ask students what they think about the course. Here are some of them:

- *"I'm too nervous to hear what they're going to say"*: Me too, but once the sweaty-palmed collection is over, I've never regretted asking. They're strong critics, but also saw strengths I didn't realize were there.
- *"Why ask if I can't make changes?"*: It's true that some of the comments are about things I can't change: the classroom, the size of the class, etc. Even these comments are helpful, though, because they remind me that, if the class is fidgeting, it's not just me, it's also that Burke Theatre Auditoriums have too little leg room!
- *"Why ask if I don't want to make changes?"*: Sometimes they comment on things that I'm not willing to change. For example, some complain that the textbook is challenging. Well, I want to challenge them; that's the point. Some want major essay assignments in a class of 150. Well... I'm not sure I can get 150 ten-page papers back to students quickly enough for it to be meaningful learning (nor do I want to)! Nonetheless, asking gives me an opportunity to address student concerns openly. I think students are more accepting of what I can't or won't change if they know why.
- *"You can never please everyone"*: Of course, sometimes the students say contradictory things. Half say the material is just the right amount, half say it is too much; some say too slow, others say too fast. I take this split to mean that aspect is actually going all right, more or less (and it helps the students to hear that half the class actually has the opposite perception).
- *"I need class time to cover content"*: More than once I've skipped mid-semester feedback for this very reason. When I do, though, I think I miss out on an opportunity to develop strategies to deliver content more effectively and efficiently.
- *"I don't have time to process the results"*: Recording the comments obviously takes time. Still, I consider it to be one of the most beneficial uses of time to improve teaching.

Over the long haul, by keeping mid-semester and final evaluation comments on my computer, I can see where I have improved and where I still need to work on things (with implications for course preparation the following year).

- *"I know how to teach this class"*: It's tempting to think I don't need the students' feedback now that I've taught the same courses several times. However, what worked in 2004 didn't necessarily work in 2005. Comments definitely change from one year to the next, depending on the personality and experience of each group of students. Doing mid-term evaluations helps me shape the course to the personalities, learning goals and styles of students in each class, each semester.

### Results

Overall, asking for student feedback mid-semester sets up an atmosphere of teacher-student collaboration that carries through the rest of the term. The process of soliciting comments, reporting back, and then trying to act on the suggestions adds openness and understanding in the class atmosphere. The process adds substance to my first day statement "you'll get out of this course what you put into it". It sets the tone for students not just sitting in class and receiving from me, but being active participants in shaping the course to fit their needs. It also establishes me as a learner alongside the students. Students have taught me most of what I know about teaching, and I'm grateful for their collaboration in mid-term evaluations.

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