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How Can We (or You) Help Improve Teaching and Learning at GGC?

We invite you to send us ideas for workshops or programs you might be interested in doing or having us organize. We are also willing to work with individual schools to help develop discipline-based programs. Contact Stella Smith to discuss any ideas (ssmith2@ggc.edu).

Special Thanks: Dr. Jason Mosser, Editorial Support for the *The Teacher's Edge*

From the Director

By Dr. Stella Smith

We are fast approaching the end of the semester and as is oftentimes the case, scurrying to cover those last remaining chapters or material that we believe is crucial to our students' understanding of our discipline. In our haste to feel assured that, indeed, all was covered, we fail to carve out time in class to reflect, with our students, on the course, what they learned and how this learning applies to their lives. Margaret Walsh, a professor of sociology, suggests these tips for wrapping up a course.

Set aside time in the final class or two to reflect and connect knowledge learned through the entire course. This may take the form of a lively discussion, a guest speaker, or a timely film clip. Plan a celebratory event with a take-home message. Having celebrations in and out of class can result in conversation that's as important as the refreshments provided. Suggest readings and resources for the future. Hand out a list of suggested readings with your comments on why you're recommending them. Perhaps consider a blog or wiki to continue the conversation online and extend it beyond the semester. The key take-away here is to give as much thought to the last days of your courses as you do to the first days.

Margaret Walsh. End Notes: Distinctive Ways to Wrap-Up a College Course. The Teaching Professor, May 2008.

Teaching Topic: Help students become more comfortable with class discussions.

A blog-discussion format that precedes a live class discussion can be helpful in that it gives students a warm-up, of sorts. If my students have been posting about an issue on the blog-comments board for a couple of days, and I come into class and start asking questions, they're primed and ready to go with a discussion. They work off of what they have said to one another online, and we get to further the conversation even more because in most cases the basics have already been covered. My more-reticent students are much less hesitant, and when certain students still hang back, I can point to them and say, "What about the point you made on the comments board about such-and-such?..." and prompt them with their earlier posted remarks.

Steve Fox. Teaching Matters: Rethinking the Hybrid Course. The Chronicle of Higher Education, Feb 5, 2010 pg. A38

A Teacher Speaks: Dr. Mai Yin Tsoi on Stereotypes in the Classroom

“I don’t stereotype! I have friends from all races. I think everyone is equal.”

The topic of stereotypes has been, historically, a very emotionally charged one. Especially in Georgia, where race has played such an integral role for so many years, it is difficult for many to feel comfortable talking about stereotypes. However, stereotypes technically extend well past the arena of race; they are comprised of gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and even physical appearances. A common statement from teachers is, “I teach subject X. Stereotypes have nothing to do with my class. I treat all my students equally.” So, why should we instructors consider stereotypes in our pedagogy?

As humans, we naturally form stereotypes. The word “stereotype” comes from the Greek words “stereo” and “typos”, which mean “solid impression”. Thus, to make sense of the enormous universe, we humans tend to connect subjects with similar characteristics. C.E. Hurst, from the College of Wooster, once wrote, “Lack of familiarity encourages the lumping together of unknown individuals.” Therefore, the stereotypes we have about our students and populations in our community really stem from our attempts to understand the myriad backgrounds, personalities, ideas, and actions we encounter every day. In light of the fact that, as teachers, we have a great number of interpersonal interactions every day here at GGC, it makes sense that teachers would be likely to form stereotypes or “solid impressions” of our students.

But because of those human interactions between our colleagues and students, we have to be mindful of the “lens” through which we view our world. Each person’s lens is unique to that person and can greatly impact the way those human interactions occur. I believe teachers and students could benefit from opening the discussion on stereotypes, regardless of the subject area of the course, because we could gain a deeper understanding of how we are perceived, how we want to be perceived, and now we are not being perceived.

Let us examine, for example, the stereotype that Asians are well-adapted to learning in the sciences. In my own science classroom, I sometimes catch myself having varying expectations of my students. Ideally, a teacher should have equal expectations from all students. But, to be honest, I know that some students are more capable than

others and their gifts and strengths are different. So, herein lies the paradox: is it wrong that I am not surprised that my Asian students earn high marks in a science class? Should I be surprised? Or perhaps I should not be surprised by any of my students’ performances and have no expectations at all? This does not mean that I teach differently to any subgroup of students or that I assign harder or easier tasks to varying students. I strive to treat all my students equally in all teaching activities and assessments. But my beliefs, I must admit, are impacted by my background, my past experiences, and varying messages I have received throughout my life. Whether I desire it or not, my beliefs will affect how I view my classroom and the interactions within it.

Unfortunately, our beliefs can influence our actions, and this is the junction at which discomfort starts. Stereotypes are not the same as discrimination in that the former does not have an action component attached to it. What we think and believe is part of being human and of living in a dynamic, information-loaded society. What we choose to act upon and use, as the basis of our choices in life is, in my opinion, a conscious, willful choice.

Therefore, I think that we teachers could benefit greatly by opening the discussion on stereotypes and model that reflective, questioning behavior for our students in the classroom. To doubt and to question are really signs of growth and openness. Why do I believe this about Asians? Why was I not surprised about my Asian students’ science scores? How do others’ beliefs compare or contrast to my beliefs? By stepping into the discomfort of stereotypes, we might be able to finally understand why we think the way we do and to allow for the adjustment and realignment of those solid impressions. I propose that, as teachers, we embrace the inquisitive, courageous spirit that defines and separates this arena we call “academia” and look inward to our own ideas and understandings about others. Truly, as we take that courageous, albeit uncomfortable, step by just opening up to the idea that our beliefs can be discussed without negative consequences, I think we do a great service to our community and to our students by giving them the courage to do the same with their own stereotypes. What a way to truly uplift and encourage reflective thinking at GGC – no matter what subject we teach!



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Vista Focus:**Dr. Michael Gagnon's One Thing**

Our students usually come to us lacking knowledge beyond what someone insisted they learn in order to be tested. As such, most fail to understand that they can actually use their syllabi to calculate their grades based on knowing their scores on completed tasks and knowing the percentage of outstanding tasks. In short, most cannot apply basic algebra to discover where they stand in a course. Although many professors spend a few minutes showing students how to calculate their grades, it is usually before an important moment in the semester (such as final exams) and thus seems to our students to lack applicability to other moments or to other classes. A better approach is to use the grade book in Blackboard to show them their current grade at any moment during the semester.

We must start by posting their grades as we know them. That is the one thing that students appreciate about blackboard, the ability to know the grades for the assignments they have completed. However, it is not enough to post their completed grades, given their inability to apply algebra, we must also compile their grades so that they become meaningful information. I find that using calculated fields makes this possible.

Calculated fields in the gradebook are exceptionally helpful. You can use a calculated field in Blackboard that uses the correct formula to show them their grade based on all or a portion of the tasks for the semester. Or you can show some subset of the overall grade that you think will be useful for them to know, such as a quiz average, or, if you keep roll in Blackboard, you can calculate the total number of absences. But what if you have assignments that students accomplish at different times during the semester? You can create a formula that requires regular data entry (which we are already supposedly doing), but doesn't require constant work from you. I use a numeric field that I regularly update that keeps track of the total percentage of tasks a student accomplishes and another calculated field that keeps track of how much of the semester's total grade has been accomplished by the student. If I divide the total grade by the percentage, I have a current grade, even if students are in different places in terms of completing tasks. This may seem simple to many of you, but it took me years to figure all this out even though none of it is particularly difficult. I'm sure, business people without college educations figure these sorts of calculations on their spreadsheets all the time, so

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I am encouraged to continue to use the gradebook as a power user to make my life easier by keeping my students better informed about where they stand in my classes at all times. You can do the same.

Want More? Additional Resources

If you missed Linda Gilbert's session on "Making Choices about Technology for Teaching," here is one of the many resources she provided--Virtual Resource Site for Teaching with Technology. This site outlines teaching and learning activities that can be used across disciplines. See the site for more details, <http://www.umuc.edu/virtualteaching/module1/strategies.html>.

***Looking Backward,
Looking Forward*****Looking Backward:**

The CTE was in moving ahead in March with workshops on Zimbra, rubrics, data analysis, 7+/- 2 Reasons We Forget, and SPSS. It also began its Microsoft Training Series with an introduction to the new 2007 layout.

We would like to thank Professors Liza Renzi, Alan Marks, and Tom Hancock for leading these events and sharing their expertise with us.

Looking Forward:

In conjunction with Educational Technology, we will be hosting a Technology Fair on 4/28 in the B Atrium. We are also springing ahead in April with several sessions listed below:

- "Math in Unexpected Places"
- Student Panel: Challenges Inside and Outside the College Classroom
- "Low Stakes Testing and the Blackboard Gradebook"
- "Intermediate SPSS"
- "Diversity Issues"
- "Lecture Capture with Echo 360"
- "Intro to Smart Board Tools"
- "Managing Your Writing Assignments Online With Turnitin"
- "Creating Quick and Convenient Blackboard Assessments"

Submission Guidelines

The Teacher's Edge encourages submissions on any aspect of college teaching and learning. The articles should not exceed two or three double-spaced pages, so as to conform to the intent of the newsletter: providing concise, thought-provoking topics that promote discussion among faculty and staff.

Articles may be submitted by GGC faculty, staff, and even students so that all voices are represented for our readers. Our web site gives us rich opportunities for posting ancillary materials to accompany submissions.

Submit manuscripts to Stella Smith, CTE Director.