

Sept/Oct 2008 - Vol I, No 1

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**NEW!!!**

Fridays at the FIDL!

*Fine Tune Your  
Course at the*



Faculty Instructional Design Lab

Drop-in assistance with the CTE Staff every Friday from 1-5 in Room C-2230.

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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.usg.edu).

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

## Welcome to the CTE Newsletter!

### A Personal Message from the CTE Director

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *The Teacher's Edge*, a newsletter distributed by the Center for Teaching Excellence at Georgia Gwinnett College. Despite being in our infancy as a center, we hope you find our events engaging and informative. Our purpose is to bring teachers together to share their best practices, their concerns, and their solutions to the myriad issues facing us today in the classroom and in our professional lives. As the disciples of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) point out, making teaching visible makes us all better teachers. So, hopefully, through this publication and our scheduled events, individual consultations, and web resources, we will shine a light on teaching and bring teachers together for the benefit of faculty and students. This newsletter is part of our effort to promote a community of teachers; it will be published bi-monthly and contain short columns by faculty and CTE staff on various topics related to teaching and learning, a featured Website related to a teaching/technology topic, teaching tips, and other useful information. The newsletter will also publicize upcoming CTE activities and state-wide events related to faculty development.

### Teaching Topic: Conducting a "Paper Slam"

After attending a conference in which a Poster Slam was conducted, Dr. Schlitz decided to apply it to her classroom. At the conference, participants in the poster sessions were given one minute to promote their session either through a PowerPoint slide or other means. A bell rang to indicate their allotted time had been met. For her classroom, she redesigned the paper slam format for the day student papers were due. Here is her description of the "Slam."

I reasoned that students spend a good deal of time and energy on these papers and that their work deserved a broader audience. Students could be learning from each other and the "Paper Slam" offered an innovative and unique venue for that learning.

Towards the end of each semester as paper due dates draw closer, I explain the "Slam" requirements to my students. I ask them to develop one slide that highlights the key ideas explored in their papers, and I require them to prepare a 60-90-second oral narrative that explains their work to their peers. They are free to use images and color and to explore various modes of composition. Students take advantage of this and use their creative energy to prepare intriguing slides. Being asked to prepare a slide and oral synopsis that effectively distills their work encourages student authors to think carefully about the content, organization, and delivery of their message—both in their "Slam" materials and in their papers as well.

Students email their slides to me in the days before the "Slam" and I organize them alphabetically by last name to determine the presentation order. I then compile the slides into a single slideshow. Finally, I create a text documents that lists the students' names and their topics in order. I distribute copies to the class so that everyone can follow along and take notes during the "Paper Slam."

On the day of the "Slam," I seat students in alphabetical order and appoint a timer who holds up a "stop" sign when a presenter exceeds his or her allotted time. The "Slam" advances as I scroll through slides and students move to the front of the room to present when their slides are displayed. Some students prepare and read note cards while others extemporize in response to prompts built into their slides. Either way, the students convey their ideas to their peers, and the process is as fun as it is illuminating.

Students have much to learn from one another's research, but too often the opportunity to exchange ideas is missed. A "Paper Slam" can rectify this by inviting students to present their research in a way that acknowledges the importance of their work and continues the academic tradition of sharing work with peers.

Schlitz, S. (2008, April). *How To Conduct a 'Paper Slam'*. *The Teaching Professor*, April, 2008. This excerpt reprinted by permission of the author and *The Teaching Professor*. ♦

### Vista Focus:

#### What is "WebCT" Vista Good For? My Top 10 List

by David Robinson

GGC faculty use the Blackboard (formerly WebCT) Vista Course Management System as a platform to support their courses. Blackboard (Bb) Vista offers a rich suite of course management tools. As GGC's Vista Administrator and Trainer, I've been asked about the advantages of using Bb Vista. I'll give you my top ten reasons for using Vista.

#### 10. Students expect course content to be available online:

Our students are accustomed to using the Internet for information, communication, purchases, and entertainment. They expect their college classes to offer the same convenience and quality as YouTube and Amazon.

**9. Class assignments can be turned in electronically:** In many cases, we don't really need that paper version of a student's work. Vista gives us a way to "take up," store, grade, and return student work. When you grade an assignment, the grade is automatically added to your gradebook.

**8. Student grades are always available:** You can release student scores instantly, so students always have access to their grades.

**7. Course content is organized and presented the way you want it:** PowerPoint, web pages, PDFs, and Word docs are all available and presented using the organizational schema you want.

**6. You can send announcements to an entire class:** You don't have to email the whole class; you can send scheduled or impromptu announcements that will appear as a pop-up and then remain on students' Announcements list.

**5. Class syllabus and schedule are always available:** "The dog ate my syllabus!" is a thing of the past. Your online syllabus and schedule are always available.

**4. You can use pre-class quizzes to encourage students to study before class:** Did *anybody* read the assignment? Now you can use Vista quizzes to "encourage doing the reading" and give immediate feedback without taking valuable class time.

**3. You can reach multiple learning styles:** With Bb Vista, you can present material visually in text, pictures, graphs, or even video. You can add audio files, or present interactive content. You can offer students course materials in a variety of formats to reach a variety of learning styles.

**2. You can increase student engagement:** Students can have contact with you and with classmates in a variety of online settings using Vista. Discussions, chats, group break-out areas, quiz and assignment comments, and immediate feedback all increase the students' sense of being connected and valued.

**1. You can save class time for more interesting activities:** A good teacher has more to offer than class time typically allows, and much valuable time can be stolen by mundane "housekeeping" tasks. If you "delegate" some of these routine tasks to Vista, then you have more time to engage in the activities that only you can offer your students. ♦

### A Teacher Speaks:

#### Why Do It Alone?

#### Building Your Syllabus with Students

By Dr. Jennifer Wunder

Part of our mission at GGC is to provide students with active learning environments and practical opportunities to solve problems, synthesize information, and apply knowledge. We take care to design our courses in ways that promote student engagement and encourage our students to improve their critical thinking and social skills as they learn responsible practices that will help them succeed in college and in their chosen careers. With those goals in mind, I'd like to suggest to you one way to incorporate our mission in your classrooms by allowing your students to take part in course design and work with you to craft class syllabi.

For several years now, I've been asking my students to join me in this process, and I've found the results to be very rewarding. I dedicate the first week of classes to close analysis of sample syllabi – some good and some deliberately downright frightening – and ask my students to think carefully about what we're there to do and how we're going to do it. We talk audience, format, language, content, assessment, and best practices; we conduct on-the-fly research as they bring to class ideas they like that they've found in other professors' syllabi; and then we get to work, assessing our options, negotiating points, and crafting a plan for our studies and a document that we all understand and agree to honor. We may not be working with a textbook that first week, but we are laying the foundation for our course and practicing skills we will use throughout the semester.

During the first week of class, syllabus construction encourages social integration as students meet each other, work together, and learn their peers' learning styles and preferences. When asked to analyze examples of syllabi and then craft one of their own, students must work together to use critical and creative thinking to identify a range of potential problems and opportunities and to evaluate incentives and disincentives. Syllabi also lend themselves quite naturally to discussions about decision making from multiple perspectives – particularly when students are asked to make decisions about content, policies, and even due dates while taking into account their personal goals and desires as well as institutional and course constraints under which they must operate. Finally, students must practice sound oral and written communication skills to convey ideas in language suited for a broad audience, persuade others of the value of one policy over another, negotiate agreements, and eventually craft a final document acceptable for class use.

Students can participate in the construction of challenging but attainable goals and expectations while under the guidance of the professor who acts as a mentor in the process. At the same time, professors can offer their expertise about what works and what doesn't while encouraging students to stay on task. Finally, a key product of the entire process is student buy-in; as stakeholders in the process and the results, students are far more likely to stay engaged and take responsibility for their role in learning the course content and achieving course outcomes. The syllabus becomes truly theirs rather than an instructor's agenda.

Granting students the freedom to negotiate multiple points of a syllabus can seem daunting, but many of the benefits I've mentioned can also be achieved by granting students only partial control over the syllabus. It's not necessary to always allow

all-out freedom, and I emphasize to my students that they have to make sound cases for the contents of their syllabi. I give them a quote of Stanley Fish's: not "anything goes," but rather, "anything that can be made to go goes". I challenge them to build something that "goes."<sup>1</sup> With that in mind, students can take part in several aspects of syllabus construction. For example, they can

- Reorganize and redesign the syllabus format and determine the mediums by which the syllabus can be accessed so that they are most likely to use it and use it often;
- Revise the language of the syllabus to better suit a student audience and convey positive impressions of the course and professor;
- Craft assignments that will demonstrate mastery of skills or outcomes achieved while allowing for different learning styles;
- Collaborate with the professor to determine grading scales or rubrics for assessment, thereby ensuring that they are fully aware of what is expected and how their work will be evaluated;
- Plan for and set due dates for assignments based on collective review of class members' work and school obligations so as to cut back on problems with late assignments;
- Establish guidelines for student participation and/or makeup policies for late or missed work that respect the time and effort of all parties involved and encourage personal responsibility and an acceptable work ethic;
- Determine within ranges set by the professor how assignments will weigh in their final grades so students can learn to self-evaluate, play to their strengths, and work to improve their weaknesses.

There is substantial research indicating that professors can get the best results in the classroom when their students actively engage with the material and have personal investments in the outcomes. By dedicating your first week to participatory syllabus design, you can create a student-centered learning environment that empowers everyone involved and sets a positive agenda for the entire semester. This can be an opportunity to open the year with an activity that embodies GGC's mission and goals in ways that students understand and appreciate, and I hope that some of you will give it a try and find it as rewarding and beneficial as I do.

#### Selected Additional Reading

Bain, Ken. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2004.

Dorwick, Keith. "The Last Bastion: Student Self Determination and the Making of a Syllabus." *Teaching in the Community Colleges Journal* 1.2 (Winter 1996). ERIC Accession No. ED 387 823.

Hudd, Suzanne S. "Syllabus under Construction: Involving Students in the Creation of Class Assignments." *Teaching Sociology* 31.2 (Apr 2003): 195-202.

Thompson, Blair. "The Syllabus as a Communication Document: Constructing and Presenting the Syllabus." *Communication Education* 56.1 (Jan 2007): 54-71.

Wingfield, Sue Stewart and Gregory S. Black. "Active versus Passive Course Designs: The Impact on Student Outcomes." *Journal of Education for Business* 81.2 (Nov-Dec 2005): 119.

<sup>1</sup> Fish, Stanley. *The Trouble with Principle*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1999: 307. ♦

## Looking Backward, Looking Forward

### Looking Backward:

Last year was the founding year for the CTE. Stella Smith was hired as Director and began building the program with academic year 2007-2008 offerings. Over the summer, the CTE staff worked diligently to build a program of workshops, brown bags, seminars, and other events that will be offered throughout the coming year.

### Looking Forward:

We have a big year planned for you! Here are some of the upcoming topics you might be interested in. More specific information can be found at the CTE Jovo site at [jovo.ggc.usg.edu/cte](http://jovo.ggc.usg.edu/cte).

"Creating a Culture of Student Accountability "

"Classroom (Mis)management" - video snippets with discussion  
"Student Engagement with Blackboard Vista" by David Robinson

"Faculty Showcase" with Dr. Ellen Rafshoon

"So Many Choices... What Technology Tool Should I Use?"

"Working with Small Groups"

"Virtual Worlds in Second Life"

"Rubrics: Techniques for Making & Grading"

"Online Collaboration Tools" ♦

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## Want More? Additional Resources

The IDEA Center at Kansas State University makes available short papers related to teaching and learning (<http://idea.ksu.edu/resources/Papers.html>). The topics are varied and include improving lectures, improving student writing, answering/asking questions, and building assessment instruments. An article entitled, "The Technology Literate Professor: Are We There Yet?" touches on technology tools such as concept mapping software, blogs, and podcasts. The author argues for a voice coming from the bottom up—pedagogical voices from the classroom—so that any technology decision can be effectively aligned with student learning and new technologies. This article may be accessed at [http://idea.ksu.edu/papers/Idea\\_Paper\\_43.pdf](http://idea.ksu.edu/papers/Idea_Paper_43.pdf). ♦

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## 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 (<http://jovo.ggc.usg.edu/cte>) gives us rich opportunities for posting ancillary materials to accompany submissions.

Submit manuscripts to Stella Smith, CTE Director. ♦