



Fall 2010

In this Issue....

From the Director: *Fixin' A Course*

Vista Focus: *LMS Pilots*

A Teacher Speaks: *A Simple Way to Bring the World to Your Classroom*

Want More? *Additional Resources*

Teaching Topic: *How Many Tests?*

Looking Backward, Looking Forward

Contact Information

- Stella Smith, Director
ssmith2@ggc.edu
678-407-5720
- David Robinson, Learning Management Systems Administrator
drobinso@ggc.edu
678-407-5111
- Gautam Saha
Instructional Designer
gsaha@ggc.edu
678-407-5561
- Stephanie Whittington
Technical Trainer
swhittin@ggc.edu
678-407-5560

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: *Fixin' A Course*

By Dr. Stella Smith

“Our course restructuring was motivated by several perceived deficiencies common to traditional lecture-based introductory courses. The most pronounced concern, shared by multiple faculty involved in the course, was poor student attitudes. Both numeric and written responses on course evaluations indicated that students were not satisfied with the course and did not recognize the importance of the course content to their education as biologists. For example, students often commented on course evaluations that the lectures and/or course materials were ‘boring’.”(p. 204)

In their gut, teachers know when their course isn't clicking. They either realize there's a problem but don't know how to fix it, or they're unwilling to take what can be an enormous amount of time to tackle course redesign. In this case, the first author, who was the course instructor, decided, with the support of colleagues in the department, to redesign the course. He made these decisions: re-order the course content and include active learning and group problem solving. The changes—integrate clickers for exam review days, create ad hoc groups around specific topics—while not particularly burdensome made a difference. The students benefited from these changes, but then, so did the professor.

Taking this course of action demonstrates that we can fix any problem in our classroom, once we make the leap.

Reference: Armbruster, P., Patel, M., Johnson, E., and Weiss, M. (2009). Active learning and student-centered pedagogy improve student attitudes and performance in introductory biology. Cell Biology Education, 8 (Fall), 203-213. Adapted from Teaching Professor Blog, Finding the Motivation to Fix a Course, Posted: 21 Sep 2010.

Vista Focus: *LMS Pilots*

By David Robinson

Just as the USG is looking at Learning Management System (LMS) alternatives to Bb Vista (WebCT), so GGC is looking at our LMS options. One obvious contender is Blackboard Learn v9.1. This Fall, a few Faculty were engaged in a first pilot of Bb9.1. For Spring, we are looking for faculty willing to teach one or more classes on this new Blackboard version.

Some of the new features in Bb9.1 are: drag and drop re-ordering, a more intuitive grade book, mash-up/ video embedding, notifications, Early Warning System, and wiki-style collaborative pages. Some of the other Bb9.1 features are not yet on par with Bb Vista, as you can see by Pilot Faculty comments in the “Nine One Chronicles” blog on the CTE tab in myGGC.

I am encouraged by the direction Blackboard is taking, and would love to have a significant number of pilot faculty for Spring, as we look to future LMS possibilities. Contact me (drobinson@ggc.edu/ x5111) if you are interested or have questions.

Moodle (<http://moodle.org/community>) is a free and open source learning management system adopted by institutions of higher education throughout the world. It provides activity modules such as forums, databases, and wikis to build richly collaborative communities along with the features common to all LMSs such as quizzes, assignments, gradebook, calendar, peer review, journals, and blogs. We are looking for faculty to participate in a Moodle pilot in Spring 2011 as well. Contact Gautam Saha at gsaha@ggc.edu or ext. 5561 for more details.

**A Teacher Speaks:
A Simple Way to Bring the World
to Your Classroom
by Dr. Hsi-Ling Huang**

As an international faculty, it has been my mission to promote cultural awareness member in my classes. In the summer of 2009, when I went back to Taiwan for my vacation, I had an opportunity to visit my former teachers in the English Department at my former institution, Soochow University. Mr. Don Gilleland, one of my favorite teachers during my undergraduate years, and I decided to start some projects together. One of the projects that had been on my mind for a long time was to have an international student conference where my students could speak to international students from different countries and learn about other cultures by using the Internet. Mr. Gilleland liked the idea, and we decided to have our students meet online in Fall semester, 2009. This experience turned to be one simple but fulfilling way to bring the world to my students.

Our first step was to find a date and time for our students to meet. Since Taiwan is twelve hours ahead of the Eastern Time Zone of the US, I chose my 8 AM English 1101 to meet with Mr. Gilleland's evening class. Also, Taiwan's university system did not start Fall semester until mid September, so we decided to set the conference date in late October so that Mr. Gilleland would have enough time to prepare his students. We could not postpone the date later than October, however, because once daylight saving time ended, we would have thirteen hours difference. Our classes were both freshman composition, so we thought it was a good idea to have students learn about each other's higher education system. We made a list of questions for students to prepare for the conference, and then we began working on technology issues. Although GGC has advanced technology to enhance teaching, not every country has the same level of technological support in its university system. Because Soochow University did not have the conferencing equipment like GGC, we decided to use Skype for its free service. In order to give students a chance to see each other, I used my personal laptop that has a better built-in webcam and HD quality picture for this project. With the help of our technology staff, I tested Skype with Soochow's site on numerous occasions to make sure the sound and picture were both clear. I also reserved A 1650 since it was already equipped with video conferencing technology.

Continued at the top.

Meanwhile, I assigned students into groups and asked them to elect group leaders to be the speakers for our class. Each group was to collect information on the GGC community so that the speaker could introduce GGC to Soochow University students. They also prepared questions that they wanted to ask the Taiwanese students ahead of time so that I could pass these on to Mr. Gilleland. Since Soochow students were ESL, we did not want them to feel intimidated by GGC's native speakers.

I also discussed with my students how they should avoid using slang and should speak slowly and clearly. My students had all been very excited about the impending exchange since the beginning of the semester, for even though GGC has a diverse student body, many of my students never traveled outside the US. It was a brand new experience for them to actually see and talk to international students.

On the day of the conference, I invited some faculty and Dean Richardson to visit my class so that they could also meet Mr. Gilleland and Taiwanese students. Even though we tested technology on countless times, in the end, there were still some technical issues on Taiwan's side. Soochow students only saw GGC students briefly because their webcam stopped working. However, our audio still worked, so the conference continued. My students were impressed by the information they learned about Taiwan's university system and how well-spoken Soochow students were. Although the conference only lasted less than an hour and students still had many questions, they told me they really enjoyed the experience. Many of them asked me if they could find Soochow students on Facebook or exchange email addresses so that they could continue the conversation. Some of them even told me that they wanted to try the study abroad program and maybe visit Soochow students in the future.

This project did not cost any money but left a fundamental influence on the students in both countries. Since GGC has so many international faculty, the future network can be greater and more dynamic. With the advance of technology, I now have more ideas of how I can bring the world to my students and change their perspectives.

Want More? Additional Resources

Did you know that you could create RSS feeds in the version of Blackboard we use at GGC? RSS feeds can be an incredibly powerful and useful teaching tool for your classes. Want to learn more how to do this in your blackboard class? Ask the CTE for assistance or explore this link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ya0F3Z-ZYMw>

Teaching Topic: How Many Tests?

Most college teachers assume that more tests are better than a few. Why? What caused us to decide on three or four unit tests followed by a final? Is there evidence that students don't do as well in courses where there are only a midterm and a final? Why do we think that more tests might be better? And what do we mean by better? Higher grades? More learning?

In the article referenced below, authors True Kuo and Albert Simon review the literature on test frequency, and suprisingly, it is extensive. They rely heavily on a 1991 meta-analysis that compared the results of 40 studies analyzing how test frequency impacted student learning as measured by a cumulative final or standardized exam. The results (reported in the meta-analysis and in more recent research) are definitely mixed. In the meta-analysis, 13 of 40 studies showed a moderate benefit to student learning for frequent as opposed to less frequent or no testing prior to the final. That means in the majority of the studies, no effect or a nonsignificant one was reported.

In addition to this rather suprising overall finding, there were other results of interest. When the results indicated a positive effect of frequent tests, the "student learning outcome...did not correlate with test frequency in a linear fashion." (p.157) This means that if two tests were beneficial, four tests were not twice as beneficial. "In other words, the test frequency effect diminishes as the absolute number of section tests increases." (p. 157)

Then there's the finding that when more tests and quizzes result in a higher scores-scores on weekly exams tend to be higher than those on monthly exams, which makes sense because there is less material to study for each test-this improved performance on the more frequent tests did not result in better performance on the cumulative final.

Another finding relates to the role feedback plays in improving exam performance. Students learn more (as measured by exam scores) when each test is followed by a debrief session that focuses on their mastery of material missed on the exam. Authors Kuo and Simon say it is reasonable to hypothesize "that proper feedback and/or instruction has to accompany each test in order for the frequent testing to be effective in improving learning outcomes." (p. 158)

Other evidence suggests that the test format needs to remain consistent throughout the course. The test frequency benefit is diminished when an instructor uses one kind of question format on exams given during the course

Continued at the top.

and another kind of question and format on the final.

One of the more consistent findings emerging out of this research is that student attitudes are more positive toward the course and instructor when they are given frequent exams. More tests and quizzes result in better attendance in class, and students find the exam experience less stressful when it occurs more regularly.

It is amazing how many aspects of instructional practice are influenced by what other faculty are doing, as opposed to what emerges from the research. In case of test frequency, because research results are mixed, instructors should look at what's happening in their individual courses. Are students doing better on the final when there are two midcourse tests or when there are four? Certainly there are some variables that need to be considered. One class may just contain a lot better students than another, but over several sections, a trend may emerge. If nothing else, the research should motivate us to examine our assumptions about testing frequency and explore whether the premises on which they rest are valid.

Kuo, T., and Simon, A. (2009). How many tests do we really need? *College Teaching*, 57 (3), 156-160 as referenced in the *Teaching Professor* November 2009.

Looking Backward, Looking Forward

Looking Backward:

The CTE started the year with Gradebook training sessions as well as Breakfast Bytes in which faculty learned about a neat technology tool or tip. Sessions were also held on building wikis, student accountability, grading student writing, building online communities, paths to diversity, middle school outreach, studying abroad, engaging students with Power Point, Disability Awareness month, and our lecture capture tool, Echo 360.

Looking Forward:

The USG will offer an online seminar on 11/18 at 3pm spotlighting the winners of the Four Regents' Teaching Excellence Awards. Dr. Kristina Mormino will host a session titled, "Teaching and Learning Rhythms" on 11/16. Look for a holiday gathering invite from the CTE staff for the week of December 6th!

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.