



Center for Teaching and Learning Newsletter

30 March 2016

Message from the Director



“I didn’t know what you wanted.” How often do we hear that refrain from students who did poorly on an assignment? To many students, college is a game in which you just need to figure out the idiographic and arbitrary rules of success for each instructor. This is clearly not the case, but such students do have a point. As instructors, we often don’t make clear to students how to learn, the purposes of our assignments, and the like. Transparency in assignments boosts students’ success (and especially underserved students’ success) significantly in three important areas: academic confidence, sense of belonging, and mastery of the skills that employers value most when hiring. As noted under Upcoming Events below, Dr. Mary-Ann Winkelmes will be coming to campus to share insights from her Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Project. Transparent teaching methods help students understand *how* and *why* they are learning course content in particular ways. Faculty members and teaching assistants are invited to the keynote address and workshop that includes an opportunity for participants to design their own transparent assignments. We hope that you will join us.

Upcoming Events

Speaker: On April 7, **Dr. Mary-Ann Winkelmes** of UNLV will speak to faculty and graduate TAs on **The Unwritten Rules of College: Transparency in Assignments and Its Impact on Learning** in JSOM 11.214 from 12-1:30pm. Learn more here: <http://www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning> and here: <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Unwritten-Rules-of/233245>.

Faculty and Graduate TA Workshop on **Managing Student Crises at the End of the Semester** will be held from 12-1pm on Thursday, April 21 in Galaxy Rooms A & B (SU 2.602). Please check your email for the invitation and link to RSVP.

The Office of Assessment is presenting a workshop on **Using Collected Assessment Data** on Wednesday, April 13, from 2-3pm. Please register at: <http://provost.utdallas.edu/assessment/resources>.

Faculty Workshop on **Developing a Teaching Portfolio**, facilitated by Dr. Gloria Shenoy and Dean Bruce Novak, will be held 12-1pm on April 14 in JSOM 11.214.

Teaching Tip

How can you know whether your students benefitted from their time in class? You know what you painstakingly prepared and presented, but how can you be sure of what they learned, or found exciting, or in what ways they may have missed your points entirely? Consider the *minute paper*. In the last few minutes of class, ask your students to take out a piece of paper, write their name and the date at the top, and then answer a general question like any of these:

1. What was the most important/interesting/surprising thing you learned today?
2. What did you find confusing, or what are you not sure you understand?

3. What did today's class make you wonder about, or what do you want to learn more about? Another approach is to ask students something much more specific. It may surprise you to see the variety of responses to a seemingly simple question such as:

4. What was the most important point of today's lesson?

You may find that students who are otherwise reluctant to speak up in class will have quite a lot to say in their minute papers. You can use their responses to identify points you wish to go over, or to plan alternative ways to present course material. If you explain to students that this is what you are doing, they are likely to appreciate that you are responsive to their needs as learners. For more on this approach, see Mosteller's 1989 article, "The 'muddiest point in the lecture' as a feedback device," <http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/files/bokcenter/files/otl3-mosteller-muddiest.pdf?m=1407245503>.

Research into Practice

One of most controversial areas of research in higher education concerns student ratings of course instruction. Properly interpreted, student feedback provides invaluable information about the experience of a course—information that simply is not available from any other source. Taken as a sole indicator of instructor quality, however, student course evaluations can cause more problems than they are intended to solve. In 2008, Remedios and Lieberman examined the extent to which course evaluations completed by over 700 undergraduates could be predicted by grades, workload, students' expectations, and their achievement goals. Ratings were strongly related to how much students felt stimulated by the course content, but only weakly and indirectly to grades.

You can learn more about the myths and realities of student course evaluations here:

1. Remedios, R., & Lieberman, D. A. (2008). I liked your course because you taught me well: The influence of grades, workload, expectations and goals on students' evaluations of teaching. *British Educational Research Journal*, 34(1), 91-115. http://www.academia.edu/1353446/I_liked_your_course_because_you_taught_me_well_The_influence_of_grades_workload_expectations_and_goals_on_students_evaluations_of_teaching
 2. Michael Theall's overview at <http://studentratings.byu.edu/info/faculty/myths.asp>
 3. Nira Hativa's 2014 book *Student ratings of instruction: Recognizing effective teaching*, 2nd ed.
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What the Students Say—Part II

As we approach the last month of classes, student workloads and accompanying stress levels increase. Some of this is a result of instructors "backloading" exams, papers, and other assignments. At this stage, it is too late to change syllabi and assignments; instructors need to reconsider spreading out course requirements more evenly in subsequent semesters. Instructors can, however, avoid trying to catch up on topics and material by rushing through remaining parts of the course in an effort to make sure everything is covered. Students report that they are less able to comprehend material that is covered quickly and less likely to complete readings when the pace of the course increases because the instructor has gotten behind on the syllabus. Faced with the dilemma of covering key topics while not rushing through them, instructors should consider reducing readings and class coverage to the essentials of each topic. Recognizing that trying to do everything is likely to result in students learning and retaining little, remaining material needs to be "triaged" according to course learning objectives. Exam and final assignments then need to reflect these adjustments.

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