



Center for Teaching and Learning Newsletter

August 2017

Message from the Director



With the beginning of the new academic year, the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) is pleased to have space of its own to host meetings and events as well as carry out various administrative functions. We have newly remodeled offices on the ground floor of the McDermott Library (offices are MC 2.402 and MC 2.404). We invite you to an open house reception, details of which are given below under "Upcoming Events."

CTL has lined up an impressive set of four external speakers this year and are adding new programs for senior and junior faculty members. These are in addition to standard CTL offerings including workshops and reading groups. We welcome new and continuing graduate students and postdoctoral research associates with an interest in teaching to register for the self-paced Graduate Teaching Certificate and Postdoctoral Teaching Certificate programs. Email ctl@utdallas.edu for more information.

Upcoming Events

8/31, 12-2pm CTL Open House. Please join us for refreshments in our new workspace in MC 2.404.

Faculty and Graduate TA Workshops

- 9/18 *Simulations in Teaching*, with Jonathan Truitt and Monica Rankin
- 9/25 *"If We Learn Like That, Why Do We Teach Like This?"* with Dr. Robert Duke, Marlene and Morton Meyerson Centennial Professor and Head of Music and Human Learning at UT Austin and member of the UT System Academy of Distinguished Teachers
- 10/4 *Teaching at a Community College*, a workshop with Collin College faculty for Graduate Professionalism Week
- 10/24 Workshop on *Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners*
- 11/2 Workshop on *Academic Integrity and Student Misconduct*
- 11/8 *"Teaching Undergraduate Science"* with Dr. Linda Hodges, Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs and Director of the Faculty Development Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and former Director of the Harold W. McGraw, Jr. Center for Teaching and Learning at Princeton University
- 11/14 Workshop on *Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy*

Research Into Practice

As you consider creating or modifying your course syllabi for the fall semester, you will find it helpful to take a close look at the *tone* that you communicate in your syllabus. Even though faculty often complain that students don't seem to read the syllabus, evidence suggests that the syllabus has a powerful impact on students' first impressions of a course. When the syllabus includes the rationale for assignments, is written in a warm, friendly tone (e.g., "I welcome you to contact me" rather than "If you need to contact

me”), and communicates compassion and enthusiasm, students perceive the instructor to be more approachable.

For more on this topic, see:

Harnish, R. J., & Bridges, K. R. (2011). Effect of syllabus tone: Students’ perceptions of instructor and course. *Social Psychology of Education, 14*, 319-330.

<https://sites.nd.edu/kaneb/2016/05/12/the-syllabus-setting-a-tone-for-learning-and-engagement/>

Teaching Tip

One of the most important things instructors need to do on the first day of class is introduce themselves, but do so in a way that creates the optimal teacher-student relationship. This is not as simple as it may seem. What amount of self-disclosure will help students see that you are approachable, enthusiastic, compassionate, and knowledgeable? Consider what students want to learn about you and how you want to be perceived. It is good practice to tell the class about your background in the subject area, how you will be available to students, what they can expect about course policies and flexibility, and why. It may be obvious that it would be unhelpful to tell students that you lack experience or that you dislike teaching the course, but some self-disclosure can promote connections with students. You might tell them about academic struggles you have faced, or the nontraditional professional path that you have followed. The key is to keep such disclosure professional and relevant to avoid undermining your own authority or credibility.

For more on this, see <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/design/teach/firstday.html>

<https://chronotopeblog.com/2016/04/16/is-effective-teaching-more-about-good-relationships-than-anything-else/>

What the Students Say

Syllabi have ballooned in size over time as instructors have added more detail and followed school and state guidelines to articulate various policies. This has occurred even as course websites with much of the same information have become standard. Do students really read these documents? The answer is affirmative according to students, but there are a number of caveats. First, they don’t necessarily read syllabi carefully and pay more attention to the listing of course requirements and deadlines than they do to information about course objectives and readings. Even those students that meticulously read the syllabus do not necessarily retain everything for the duration of the course. These limitations suggest that instructors need to repeat or reinforce key elements throughout the course in order to have an impact. The familiar refrain “It’s on the syllabus” is not sufficient for the content to have its intended effect.

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