This is the Weekly Reflection podcast from Saint Louis University’s Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning. Each week, we focus on a topic that fits with our theme for the 2012-2013 academic year, Engaging All Learners. Each reflection loosely follows the five-part Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (*context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation*). The goal of this podcast is to provide an avenue into a space for thoughtful reflection on complex issues, rather than to provide answers to these issues.

**Week 12: The Power of Narrative**

**Context:**
Professor Edwards has been teaching for 30 years. He is a gifted scholar and has published several award-winning books in his field. Colleagues and students alike, point to him as the “go to” person in the department when someone really wants to know about his field. Despite this recognition of achievement and his deep knowledge and true passion for his subject, students sit in his classes with dazed looks and rarely ask questions or get involved in a discussion.

**Experience:**
Often, the more we know about our subject, the more we take for granted about it. We forget how much information students do not know, we forget how much skill students have yet to attain, and we forget how many steps of critical thought it takes to get from an observation to a conclusion, or even a hypothesis.

One way the experienced scholar/teacher can apply her deep knowledge of a subject to the concepts beginning students need to learn is through narrative. Telling the story of a concept, fact, or process, is a strong bridge between the deeply understood and the yet to know. For instance, rather than showing students the path of blood flow through the circulatory system, blood cells become characters with motive and purpose. The cells’ anatomy become characteristics and purpose become behaviors whereby students learn not just about that cell or the pathway it follows, but also about how that cell interacts with other cells and takes a journey through the body. Its actions become meaningful to students in a deeper way, which helps students to engage with the content of the course much more actively. While we must take into account the level of students in the class and create narratives accordingly, so as not to be too simplistic, creating a narrative for one lesson can easily connect to extensions and complications of the content as students move through the term and deepen their knowledge and interest in the subject. The glazed looks in class disappear not because they are being entertained, but because they have method to engage with the topic that is familiar and interesting to them.

**Reflection:**
(Take some time to consider the following prompts. You may find it helpful to write or sketch your thoughts.)

When do you notice students being the most engaged with the topic of a class? What or how are you doing or saying in those instances to assist students in that engagement? When are you most engaged when attending a conference presentation or other learning experience? When are you most engaged while teaching a class? What are you doing, saying, and thinking in those instances?
**Action:**
Consider one of the more complex or difficult ideas, concepts, processes, or methodologies you teach in one of your courses. Compose an explanation or introduction to it through a narrative. Take time to consider the ways you will be able to complicate or add to that narrative as students learn more about that idea, concept, process, or methodology.

**Evaluation:**
(The following questions are meant to be used at a later time after you have completed the Action, but may be used as a way to shape the action as well. It may be helpful to write or sketch your responses.)

With what intentions did you redesign or create the learning experience? How did those intentions present in the learning experience? Did the experience change the ways you see teaching, learning or the course?

How do you know if the change made a difference in student learning? For which students did the change make the most difference? Are there negatives for any students associated with the change you made?

What will you do next?

---

Thank you for participating in this week’s reflection.

The next reflection will be posted on Friday, November 30th. All reflections are archived for future use. For more information on this week’s topic, CTTL services, programs, or events please consult the website at http://slu.edu/cttl.