

The Notebook

From The Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence

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Director's Column

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Welcome to the first issue of the Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence's newsletter, The Notebook, for the academic year 2009-2010. This issue focuses on strategies and reflections from faculty members on preparing to start a new semester. In winter 2009, The Notebook became an online publication only; however, articles are presented in a fashion that allows easy printing. The online format provides an opportunity to expand content using active links, podcasts and short videos.

In this issue of The Notebook, we are pleased to inaugurate several new features. Mary Dunn, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Theological Studies, and Randy Richter, Ph.D., associate professor, Department of Physical Therapy and Athletic Training, have accepted our invitation to become regular columnists for the year and share their insights on teaching. Their contributions will appear in the new section, Conversations on Teaching. We are also delighted that for the first time, faculty members from SLU's Madrid campus have contributed content to the newsletter. We hope that this will foster increased dialog on teaching among faculty members from SLU's St. Louis and Madrid campuses. This issue also contains links to podcasts that allow contributors to expand their written comments.

The Center staff has planned a full semester of programs, details of which can be found on our website, <http://cte.slu.edu>. We also invite you to join the Center's twitter feed for regular updates on programs. I want to highlight two major programs that the Center is sponsoring in the fall thanks to funding from the VOICES Project. On September 11,

Patty Clayton, Ph.D., consultant, Senior Scholar with the Center for Service and Learning at Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and Visiting fellow with the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) will present a workshop on critical reflection. Michael Wesch, Ph.D., assistant professor of cultural anthropology, Kansas State University, and 2008 Carnegie U.S. Professor of the Year for Doctoral and Research Universities will present “Mediated Culture / Mediated Education” on October 1. Many of you are familiar with the YouTube video “A Vision of Students Today” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGCJ46vyR9o>) created by Dr. Wesch and his students. We encourage you to take advantage of the many services and programs offered through the Center.

Conversations on Teaching

Randy Richter, Ph.D.

Department of Physical Therapy

Preparing for a semester usually takes me through three phases. The first phase begins at the end of the semester I last taught the course in question. At this time I reflect on the course and what worked and did not work. I review the student evaluations and identify the major themes from the evaluations. Often I find it helpful to talk to a colleague about the course and student evaluations. I believe that having conversations with a knowledgeable and trusted colleague about teaching is one of the best things I can do to improve my teaching. For example, the students may indicate that a particular assignment is too burdensome. Explaining to a colleague why I think the assignment is necessary helps me to identify the pedagogical reasons for the assignment. Based on this conversation I may decide that the rationale for the assignment is weak or sound, and make or not make, adjustments accordingly. Taking notes on these reflections and conversations is helpful, although I must confess that I have not always managed to do so. As an aside, one of the tools I am trying to use to help keep track of ideas and notes for teaching is the software program OneNote, which came with the University Microsoft Office 2007 package.

The second and third phases occur a few weeks before the semester starts. As you may have guessed, the second phase is to use my reflections and notes from the first

phase as I consider changes to the course. The changes need not be substantive. Sometimes, I may only change how an assignment is presented or delivered to the students. The third phase may be idiosyncratic to the Program in Physical Therapy where most of my teaching occurs. Our program has pictures of the students by academic class. By the first day of class I hope to know 15 to 20 names of the students enrolled in class. Interacting with the students by name on the first day of class sets a nice tone for the rest of the semester. By the middle of the semester I try to know all the student names. The students seem to appreciate the effort taken to learn their names.

Conversations on Teaching

Mary Dunn, Ph.D.

Department of Theological Studies

As I discovered last year during my first year of teaching, my expectations about what students would respond to, what they would find interesting, and what would spark a fruitful discussion, were sometimes quite off the mark. To bridge the gap between my students and my teaching, I found it helpful to make a note following every class period of what worked and what didn't, including ideas for improvement in the future. I also took advantage of the CTE's mid-semester review. Although the prospect of having to face your class again after hearing their uncensored comments on your teaching can be daunting, the mid-semester evaluation is a great way to respond to student needs and concerns before it's too late. Finally, at the end of the semester, I asked my students for advice and suggestions about my courses. In redesigning my courses for this year, I have incorporated some of their great ideas.

In the past, I have simply started new courses with introductions and a review of the syllabus. Bad idea! I have since learned that it's better to take that first day to give the students a flavor of the class and my personality. I still ask the students to introduce themselves and say a bit about why they registered for the course so that I can keep any particular interests in mind as I guide our discussions throughout the semester. But I now also tend to introduce a primary text of some sort, whether a written text or a visual image, having to do with the subject of the course and ask the students to react. I begin with general questions (What do you notice? What attracts you? What repulses you?)

and then move to more specific questions dealing more directly with themes and issues that will recur throughout the course. This exercise gets the students thinking about the subject matter and what they already know—and don't know—about our topic.

Teaching Tips: Getting the Semester off to a Good Start

Anne McCabe, Ph.D., Department of English, Madrid Campus

Two key words have always kept teaching fresh and meaningful for me (and I hope for my students!): contextualize and reflect. A major part of our work involves us in contextualizing the learning experience, with questions like, “How does this class relate to the one you just came out of?” When the classroom becomes a collaborative learning experience for both me and the students, relevance emerges in sharp relief. As we construct together a fabric of knowledge that makes sense to ourselves and to the wider world, we can see aspects of the subject never seen before. I ask the students to reflect in dialog journals, and I respond with more questions. I hope, in this way, to help scaffold a sense of real understanding and ownership of knowledge and learning.

Marta Moreno, Ph.D., Chair, Department of Business Administration and Economics, Madrid Campus

In teaching mathematics and statistics, for me it is very important to get the students to ask themselves the same questions the people who developed the various theories asked when they came up with the tools we use. I always stop the class to let them think about the problem we want to solve before I even give them a hint about how it might be approached. I think these minutes of reflection help them understand the theory as a solution to a particular problem instead of an obscure mathematical method.

Elizabeth Richard, Ph.D., Undergraduate Chair of Communication

Nothing helps me start the academic year off right more than organizing my office work space. Whether you are lucky enough to have an office of your own, or if you simply have a desk where you do work, there are a few things that you can do to lay a good organizational foundation for the upcoming academic year. Create spreadsheets for recording and calculating grades and attendance. Prepare folders and binders to organize teaching materials and graded and ungraded student work for each of the classes you teach. Mark your calendar with important dates and deadlines. Taking the time to do these simple tasks makes life much easier once the chaos of a new semester gets underway.

Joanne C. Langan, Ph.D., R.N., School of Nursing

As I prepare for my fall on-line Disaster Preparedness elective course, I keep the students as the focus for teaching strategies and class activities. I navigate the Bb system as they will and check for any glitches or processes that may confuse them. All websites are checked for accuracy and updated. Seminar discussion questions are created based on current global affairs. The goal is to prepare our nursing students to be capable and confident leaders when disasters or emergency situations arise. Case studies are chosen that the students can relate to and critically think through to solution.

Mike Lewis, Ph.D., Chemistry

I begin each semester by looking to the evaluations from the previous time I taught a course. While it always amazes me how the teaching likes/dislikes of a class of students can vary from one year to then next, I work hard to be cognizant of the threads that have remained constant over previous years. And to address the teaching/learning styles that change from year to year, I mark my calendar about four or five weeks into the semester for CTE to perform a midterm evaluation. When I teach a class of Chemistry majors, as I am doing in two classes this coming semester, I stress early on the importance of becoming involved in the Department's research efforts. An undergraduate education is incomplete if the student has not worked on modern problems within their discipline. Furthermore, the sense of community that comes along with joining a research group enhances the student's learning experience.

Jonathan Smith, Ph.D., American Studies

I aim always to remember that each individual class comprises a community. As such, I do all I can in the opening class session to establish a sense of community between myself and the students. Of course, the syllabus and course requirements establish the community's goals and expectations, but they do not do the work of introducing the members of that community to each other. It is easy to underestimate the value of a simple name-major-"why I'm in this course" exercise. A good introduction exercise clears the way for free discussion, inquiry, collaboration, and effective learning throughout the semester.