

Notebook – August 2011

Director's column

Debra Rudder Lohe, PhD

In my new role as Director of the Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence, I have the pleasure of welcoming you to this first issue of *The Notebook* for the 2011-2012 academic year. Our theme is New Beginnings, a timely topic for the start of a new term, a new academic year, perhaps even a new career for those of you new to teaching or to the University. It is also the beginning of a new phase of the Center's identity and development, and we are excited about the new opportunities the CTE has been given to enhance its work of forming – and transforming – teaching and learning at SLU.

So, you may be wondering, what *is* new in the Center?

For starters, we have added new members to the CTE community. In early August, we welcomed Dr. Gina Merys (formerly a faculty member at Creighton University), as our new Assistant Director of Faculty and Graduate Student Development. Additionally, Dr. Mike Lewis (Associate Professor in Chemistry) has agreed to serve as a Faculty Fellow for the year, and Divya Subramaniam (doctoral student in the School of Public Health) has joined us as a Graduate Assistant. But wait, there's more!

The Center has also undergone some structural changes, which have led to new positions and new ways of organizing the work we do. While we used to make a distinction between "teaching enhancement" and "learning technologies," in reality, the two areas were never separate: all of our work was the product of creative collaboration and teamwork across the entire staff. The new structure makes these collaborations even more obvious and empowers us to enlarge the scope of our services and programs. Major programs now will be divided into two broad areas – Faculty and Graduate Student Development and Instructional Design – and faculty will have more opportunities to work closely with more CTE staff.

As part of the restructuring, we were given several new staff lines, including 3 Instructional Designer (ID) positions, the first of which we filled quickly with our very own Sandy Gambill. Sandy's value in the Center and at the University is well-known, and her passion for serving SLU faculty is unparalleled. When the ID positions were first announced, Sandy asked to be considered for one of them; though she had served us well as Assistant Director for Learning Technologies, she missed her one-on-one work with faculty and wanted to get back to doing what she does best: helping faculty think in creative and innovative ways about how best to engage today's learners. We are grateful for Sandy's leadership on the Learning Technologies team; her presence in the Center has helped to pave the way for our new

emphasis on Instructional Design, and we feel lucky that she has set the bar high for our other ID positions. (We have two more Instructional Designers joining us in early September, and we're currently searching for an Assistant Director for Instructional Design. More on those – and other! – new staff in the next issue of *The Notebook* later this fall.) Whether you're looking for a single consultation or an ongoing course redesign partner, we have a team standing by to help you ensure that your learning objectives are being met.

And as if all that news weren't enough, we are kicking off the new year with the first courses to be taught in our new Learning Studio in Des Peres Hall. Three faculty were selected as Innovative Teaching Fellows for the fall – Dr. Tim Howell (Athletic Training), Dr. Stephanie Mooshegian (School for Professional Studies), and Dr. Rachel Schwartz (Public Health) will experiment with new teaching methods in this flexible, technology-rich new learning space. Be on the lookout for a feature story on this pedagogical playground in our next issue!

So, what's *not new* in the Center?

Our continued commitment to helping you create effective, engaging, and innovative learning experiences for students. To help you kick off the new year, we invited faculty from across the University to share what they do in a first class "meeting" (whether face-to-face or virtual), and they responded. Their stories of first-day activities ran the gamut, from ways to create a sense of community to methods for sparking student interest in the material to strategies for establishing expectations in creative ways.

In addition to the usual suspects – greeting students warmly upon their arrival, discussing course learning objectives, and going over the syllabus – we learned about creative new approaches to that all-important first encounter, and we've brought you just a few of them here. From Dr. Steven Harris's game of heads-and-tails to Fr. David Meconi's deep contemplation of the nature of "sloth," from Dr. Christine Warner's "Top 10 Lists" to Dr. Mary Ziegler's "show, don't tell" – you'll find some new ways of thinking about how to spend that precious first class. (Perhaps the most intriguing comes from our own Gina Merys, who tells us she begins the semester by asking students to *leave* the classroom!)

In addition to these wonderful contributions, we also are pleased to acknowledge our three regular faculty columnists, who will write in each issue this year. Dr. Ben de Foy (Earth and Atmospheric Sciences and Faculty Fellow in the CTE) is back again for a second stint as columnist, and he is joined by Dr. Deanna Marie Mason (Nursing, Madrid campus), and Dr. Lynda A. Morrison (Molecular Microbiology and Immunology). We are delighted they've agreed to share their teaching experiences and stimulate your thinking about pedagogy throughout the year.

In all of these contributions, we see anew just how well-spent the first class meeting can be, what an important opportunity it presents to meet students where they are and to challenge them to treat their world in new, more critical, more reflective ways.

Finally . . .

If you're brand-new to teaching, or just looking for new ways to infuse your teaching with new energy, I invite you to stop in and see us. We have a whole slate of interesting workshops and programs on **our fall calendar** (<http://cte.slu.edu/fall11ets.pdf>), and we've put together a whole year of programming on **Writing to Learn** ([link to PDF of the flyer](#)), focusing on the importance (and challenges) of writing in education.

As you reflect on the semester and year to come, I invite you to do as the Center will be doing: look back to the past, its lessons and experiences, so that new action is firmly rooted in a deep awareness of context and in meaningful self-evaluation. As with new branches on an old tree, what's "new" is usually the result of many years' growth.

Columnists:

I'm Ben, and I'm Bringing Bananas

Benjamin de Foy, Ph.D. (Earth and Atmospheric Sciences)

For my first class, I used to repeat a simple psychological experiment: we would go around the class saying names, where we were from, and a third variable ingredient (major / favorite film / occupation 10 years from now...). Invariably, we would find that after 7 to 9 students we wouldn't just stop remembering new names, but we would also forget all the previous ones.

Why bother? Most of the students did not take much interest in the exercise. Even though I would eventually learn the names, I would still be one of the only ones to know them. And yet we are a brick and mortar operation and we go to a lot of trouble and expense to bring people physically together. Is this just a legacy habit headed for the scrap heap?

Jose Bowen thinks not. He advocates "Teaching Naked" (1). (It helps that he's a Jazz musician, and so very cool). Pull the technology out of the classroom, have all the students do the reading / view podcasts / play some learning games before class. Post a short reading quiz on-line to make sure everyone is on the same page. Then, come to class primed for something that happens best when people are together: discussion and connection.

One of my informal benchmarks for a class is to see how long it takes for the students to exchange phone numbers. This can take up until mid-term or later. During class I promote small group discussions and problem solving to bring everyone together. But In the major classes, I assign a few hard homework assignments in order to really bring everyone together (outside of the classroom).

As for the first day, for a class smaller than 25, I pull out the party games and we go around the class actually remembering names. He's Mike, and he's bringing mangoes to the party. You'll remember Mike the Mango for the rest of the semester (2). Two catches to watch out for: 1. professor gets to go first and last, 2. be prepared to assist a student in distress: what can Zoe bring? was it Laura who brought the latte?

1. Jeffrey R. Young, "When Computers Leave Classrooms, So Does Boredom," Chronicle of Higher Education, July 20, 2009.

2. Joshua Foer, "Secrets of a Mind-Gamer: How I trained my brain and became a world-class memory athlete," New York Times, February 15, 2011.

Learning space: Beyond the physical dimension

Deanna Marie Mason, Ph.D. (Nursing, Madrid campus)

A learning space can support or impede education and is usually conceptualized as classroom organization or location. However, a more elusive definition of space exists involving the distance from others needed to feel comfortable. In teaching, this space influences each individual's ability to feel free to speak, to be heard, and to listen to others.

Educator Parker Palmer identified the need to create learning spaces with three essential dimensions: openness, boundaries, and hospitality (1993, p. 71-74). Openness removes barriers impeding learning, such as fear of showing ignorance. Boundaries focus learning by defining specific limits to retain clarity and prevent straying into distraction. Finally, hospitality permits everyone to feel welcome and safe, rather than threatened or judged, which opens them to test hypotheses, challenge ideas, and engage in critique.

Building a learning space that includes openness, boundaries, and hospitality is a process. Most students are hesitant to enter this space in the beginning, but are drawn in when the behaviors are modeled and reinforced. Acknowledging that no one knows all of the answers and that learning is a shared activity permits students to see how openness can help them improve by clearly evaluating their personal knowledge gaps rather than hiding them.

Subjects and topics define classes, but boundaries can be clarified by showing how information is related to other subjects. Maintaining content within the boundaries of the course is necessary to make sure learning outcomes are met. However, engaging students up to those boundaries can ground the course more solidly, while also acknowledging student ideas outside course boundaries.

Allowing everyone to offer and hear short personal histories or calling everyone by name can increase a sense of hospitality. Knowing a bit more about each person cultivates a shared humanity, thus making it easier to consider the motivations and needs of the person speaking or listening. Respect usually increases when this happens and allows students to critically engage with each other.

A challenge for this academic year may include a focus on the abstract components of space by incorporating openness, boundaries, and hospitality to increase student commitment and learning outcomes.

Palmer, P. (1993). *To know as we are known: Education as a spiritual journey*. Harper: San Francisco.

Sparking Curiosity and Connectedness

Lynda A. Morrison, Ph.D. (Molecular Microbiology and Immunology)

Students don't always come to the first day of class with the bright-eyed curiosity of the very young. They may wonder how unreasonably many pages per night they'll have to read, or whether they'll have to sit through boring lectures. How do we turn our students' attention from workload to pure curiosity and interest? We learn better, and better yet synthesize and create, when we're open to learning, i.e. when we're curious.

Amongst all the hurried preparation for the semester's start, pause and consider what would make students want to come to class, and what reconnects you to your sense of wonder about your subject. Of course making clear the schedule, grading policy, and type of exams is important, but all this could be posted on the printed page or website screen. Instead of focusing on what students will be expected to do, spotlight what they can expect from you and from the class. On that first day the real concern is how to get your students hooked. What about a pithy quotation? Even Einstein waxed philosophical on his science. How about an intriguing puzzle or dilemma – something students will be able to analyze by the end of the course? Or present a controversy in the field, or some sobering facts; often the idealism and energy of youth will kick into problem-solving gear. Then, we automatically invite our students into deeper learning.

How do we also begin from the first day of class to foster connections between students, between our thoughts and theirs, between the subject matter and its relevance in our world? Perhaps ask your students why they are here and what they expect from the class. This offers an opportunity for them, and you, to know each as an individual. Draw connections between what one student offers and another. For large classes, ask students to discuss their interests in small groups and have a representative pose a question. By initiating discussion on the first day of class you build the foundation for a community of learners. Knowledge at its richest and most durable is a collective, shared experience.

Contributors:

Becoming a Classroom Community

Elena Bray Speth, PhD (Biology)

On the first day of the Fall semester, 140 students – mostly freshmen – and I meet for the first time. This first encounter brims with expectation and possibilities. We are going to meet three times a week and learn biology together for a whole semester, but right now we are strangers to each other. We have yet to become a classroom community.

I learned from my postdoctoral mentor a good solid “trick” that invariably melts the ice and gets us all talking. On the first day, every student receives a yellow manila folder and a thick marker. Simple instructions: 1. write your name really big on the folder (big enough that I can read it from anywhere in the classroom); 2. in the four corners of the folder, write things about yourself (your hometown, your major, your hobby, what you want to be ten years from today, ...); 3. folder in hand, turn around and meet your neighbor; 4. introduce your neighbor to someone else.

Someone will introduce his or her neighbor to the class.

Then, I will ask if anyone wants to become a biologist, what they think a biologist does, what biology is, and we will be off to a new great start.

Probability and Surreal Events

Steven Harris, Ph.D. (Mathematics & Computer Science)

In my first class session of Math 403, Probability & Statistics for Engineers, I open with a recreation of the opening scene in Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead":

Before the class comes in, I put up on the board a large H and a large T, and I put a number of tally marks under the H. As the students begin to arrive, I stand at the board and flip a coin, look at it, and invariably add a tally to the H column. After everyone has entered, I have, apparently, recorded maybe 40 Heads and no Tails in my flips.

I then ask the class what they think: Have they "witnessed" an extraordinary run of luck? Have I been using a coin with two heads? Or have I just been lying in my reportage? I expand on their answers, getting them to articulate why they disbelieve the apparent results of the coin experiment, and how large a run of Heads it takes for them to reach a conclusion of disbelief. This leads to a general discussion of philosophy of probability: probability is a reflection of our tendency to be surprised by certain events.

Making it Deeply Matter

Fr. David V. Meconi, S.J. (Theological Studies)

On the first day of class we read together Thomas Aquinas' question, "Whether Sloth Should Be Considered a Deadly Sin" (Summa Theologiae II-II 35.4), stressing the fact that the slothful person is not the person who is bone-idle but the one who is unwilling to concentrate. Aquinas here is quite prescient: sloth in the classical tradition is marked not so much by inactivity but by hyper-activity, the type of soul who doesn't care about anything enough to let it matter deeply. I make the argument that this is the secret vice of today's generation. Neither cold Faustian pride nor seething Petronian lust dominates the beautiful souls of our students, but it is rather the lukewarm apathy of a society indifferent to questions of truth and beauty, not simply preferring convenience and utility. This always leads to a wonderful discussion on the use of social media, the importance of fostering silence and stillness and the need to focus on "the higher things" while in university. For here, sloth manifests itself by in the person who cannot enjoy a quiet walk without a phone call, who cannot write a paper without checking Email and Facebook, and who simply cannot engage a written text without constantly flitting about. This vice, known also as acedia (Greek for "without care"), is something I ask them to notice in their lives and how it is affecting their growth as students; in the weeks to follow, almost all tell me how they never realized how "slothful" they were and many tell me about strategies they have fostered to stay more focused.

The Journey of Beginning

Gina Merys, Ph.D. (Center for Teaching Excellence)

<http://www.xtranormal.com/watch/12378589/the-journey-of-beginning?listid=25100466>

Classroom Ownership

Christine Werner, PA-C, Ph.D., RD (Physician Assistant Education)

Students can be very anxious their first semester at a new university, like Saint Louis University, especially when they come from different academic institutions or have been out of school for a while. In order to better prepare the students' expectations of a given course; I have developed a number of classroom exercises to promote "classroom expectation awareness" to ease the confusion and improve communication during course dynamics. One exercise is to have the students brainstorm and create two "Top 10" lists. One list is of student expectations for the faculty and course, and the second list is of faculty expectations for the students during the course. Expectations are defined around components of course format, workload, assignments, the evaluation process, and professionalism, to name a few examples. Midway and at the end of the course, the students are surveyed on their original "Top 10" lists to assess how well expectations were met or not, and have the opportunity to provide feedback to improve the course.

Show, Don't Tell

Mary Ziegler, J.D. (School of Law)

I use the first class to discuss the “big picture” of the course. This means two things. First, I introduce the topic in a way that students can understand and relate to. In my torts class, for example, this can mean using lawsuits in the news, like coverage of the B. P. oil spill or celebrity law suits. Second, showing students the big picture entails discussing different arguments about why the law is the way it is. What are the leading theories used to explain the body of law at issue? What justifies legal intervention in this part of life? These questions frame the course and inform every topic the students encounter.

In short, I prefer to show what is at stake in the course: what the major questions of the course are and why the answers to those questions matter, both in theory and in real world practice. The first class works best when I show rather than tell students what the goals of the course are.