

T E A C H I N G M A T T E R S

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Assessing Student Learning

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“What Do My Students Really Know?”

- Donna Qualters

This semester's *Teaching Matters* is on "assessing student learning". I'm often asked "what's the difference between evaluating student learning and assessing it, isn't it really the same thing?" This is usually followed by "I do evaluate my students' learning and give them a grade". This begs the question, what does one mean by learning? I think the answer to that question is key to how you approach the topic of learning assessment.

When I think of "learning" I think of a deep conceptual understanding of a topic, and the ability to put that knowledge to use in real life. I also think about making connections. That is, students can connect what I think they've learned in my class with what they already know in the discipline, but also with what they already know from other areas. In other words, can they see what I've conveyed as part of a bigger picture? The last component of learning for me is being able to take the knowledge from my course and use it as a foundation on which to build their subsequent knowledge base. I guess you'd call it a constructionist view. I want to know if they are continually building a base of information that they can use, expand, critique, and evaluate as they learn more and mature as learners and discipline experts.

Experience has proven to me that I cannot assess if this deeper level of knowing has actually happened with traditional evaluation methods of short term recall. We've all experienced this. Student X gets a "B" in our Foundation 101 course. Two years later we have Student X in our Advanced Level 301 class and they deny knowing anything about a topic we know we covered in Foundation 101. Does that mean they didn't deserve a B? No, it means that they got a B in short term recall. They dutifully memorized whatever information they needed to get a good grade, used this knowledge combined with some savvy critical thinking and/or test taking, and passed the test. However, since they didn't really learn it in many instances, they promptly do a "data dump" and the factual recall disappears.

So, do we stop giving tests and quizzes? Absolutely not - that's evaluation. That's our certifying that students in our class have been

exposed to a certain amount of knowledge and have passed a test on it and that's important. But that's just the first level. Assessment is a deeper professional responsibility. Assessment means we feel comfortable in saying that a student who graduates in our major has a certain set of knowledge and skills that we continually monitored as they passed through our classes. We also communicate that we, and the students, know their strengths and weaknesses and what they found valuable and useful. This is a much more complex activity, but a definitely a more rewarding one.

We're all pretty good at short term evaluation, though I confess I could use more knowledge about constructing those pesky multiple choice tests to make them valid. But on average, we can construct tests, quizzes, and projects that help us evaluate what the student knows at a point in time. What we struggle with, is documenting retention and use of that knowledge at another point in time. One way to reframe this to make it more doable is to see it as a collective responsibility, not just the sole responsibility of one professor for one class. As experts in our fields of study we've learned the subject in the most profound way and working together we can assess our students as novice learners in our field.

One way to accomplish this is to adopt more classroom oriented approaches to assessment, those so-called CATS (classroom assessment techniques) and mid term evaluations,

which give us an on-going picture of what students are responding to and retaining during the time spent in our class. But we need to develop mechanisms that allow us to put those pieces of information on student learning all together. One way is Course Charters such as the Education Department has developed. These charters clearly lay out what the learning goals/objectives of each class are; they talk about the skills students should have coming into the course and the skills they should have leaving the course. They are open to everyone and have been designed collectively so that the department has a snapshot of what the curriculum looks like as a whole. Another method is Course Memos. These are constructed AFTER the semester, where the faculty member looks at his/her learning objectives and quantifies and qualifies how they were achieved, what was

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successful, what are some problem areas, what should the next course in the curriculum sequence be aware of. Lastly, there are student portfolios, a collection of reflective works that document a student's real growth in knowledge, skills and attitudes as they progress through their education.

In this issue we have compiled, ideas, resources and references to help the individual faculty member, and the collective faculty, think more deeply about assessing the student learning in their major. It's not easy, but it is possible! The more we share ideas and work together the easier it will be for all individuals and departments to understand and certify what their students really know! ❁

Donna Qualters is Director of the Center for Effective University Teaching and Associate Professor in Education

* "If we are indeed to do what we say we do, we would *
* have to know with what traits a student enters our *
* course, with what he or she leaves, and what influences *
* account for the difference...Can we answer the question: *
* What difference did this course make? Or: How *
* different would my students be had they never taken *
* my course?" *
* - Everett K. Wilson *

Group Assignments: Some Ideas to Minimize the Pitfalls

- Gladys Mckie



Group projects offer many advantages, along with a few headaches. They fit nicely with the university's Practice-Oriented Education philosophy. In my public relations classes, where students are taught theory, tactics and skills, group projects allow me to verify that my students comprehend my teaching material. My students learn interpersonal communications, presentation and communications skills, and time management. They also get a taste of the real world.

I believe that group projects are an important learning experience. Some students don't always see it that way, however. At the beginning of almost every class there are moans and groans when I announce that a group project is required.

Is it worth it?

After nearly seven years of assigning group projects for my public relations classes, I say yes, it is worth it. But it's not always easy. I've learned a lot along the way, and I'm still learning. Since this newsletter is a forum for sharing information, I'll share some of my experiences and recommendations for assigning and supervising groups. Since "group assignment theory" is a work in progress, I hope to get a dialog going about group project experiences from other faculty members. Here's a few suggestions based on my experiences.

Be a control freak

Group projects force me to be a teacher and an "employer." If a student comes to me with a complaint about a group member, I have to deal with it just as an employer would mediate employee disputes.

Through trial and error, I've learned that I need to have control from the beginning. And I need to make the "rules" clear. In the syllabus, I explain the group project and include my group project warning.

As you will discover, working with a team is not always easy. You will have to grapple with teammates' schedules, personalities, interests and skills. Although it helps to like one another, your main goal is to work well together and present quality work. You can only do this by cooperating with each other. You will trade telephone numbers and e-mail addresses with your teammates.

Your work will be judged on accuracy, creativity, completeness and neatness. Your team members will receive the same grade unless you have received a warning (see "Grades" below). One warning and your grade will be reduce by half, i.e. an A becomes an A-. After two warnings your grade will be reduced by an entire letter grade, i.e., an A becomes a B.

Word of warning: Since a large part of your grade is based on teamwork, you are encouraged to report to me any team member who isn't holding up his or her end of the workload. If you are having problems with working with team members or other issues, please see me immediately.

I review the syllabus with students on the first day of class. For my classes, the ideal group is three students. Four is the maximum. It's much easier for three students to coordinate schedules if they need to meet outside class.

After about the first three years of assigning group projects, I no longer let students select their group. At the end of drop/add period, when I know who's enrolled and who's not, I randomly select groups from the class roster. This minimizes the chance that friends will work together. A good way to end a friendship is to work in a group together. Besides, in the real world, you seldom get to pick your fellow employees.

After I assign the groups, I come to class with my group assignment list and enough copies for all students. I give them about 15 minutes at the end of class to exchange phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

The semester schedule has allowed more time to meet during class. I have a Tuesday/Friday schedule, with a little more than 90 minutes of class time. I try to give them at least a half-hour on one of those days to meet as a group. In the past, I

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have let groups meet at the end of class, warning them that they should take advantage of this time and actually meet and not use this as an excuse to leave class early. Class time is one of the few times when all students have the same schedule. Starting with this semester, I am holding a few group meetings at the beginning of class. I think this will reduce the likelihood of students skipping out of class early.

Go team!

I know this is a bit of a public relations "spin," but try calling them teams instead of groups. It generates a feeling of team spirit. My Public Relations Practice class teams are required to name their team and design a "company" logo.

A little competition never hurts.

My Public Relations Practice teams usually create a new client proposal for the same client. (Whenever possible, I use an actual business or organization for the PR Practice group.) so they are in competition with each other. I discovered that the competitive spirit triumphs. Students seem to work harder if they are part of a competition. Whenever possible, the client is present during the presentations. This extra incentive boosts creativity.

Keep in touch.

I meet with groups several times before deadline to assess progress. Sometimes, especially if I have a lot of teams, I ask teams to write a short progress report. Keeping in touch during the semester allows me to make sure they're on track and solve problems before they become major issues.

Irreconcilable differences.

I've found problems occur around three areas: personality conflicts, creative differences and irresponsible (or absentee) team members. Unfortunately, they all involve me. This is my role as a boss or "dispute manager." Of the three issues, creative differences are usually the easiest to solve. It's also a good learning experience, albeit sometimes painful. All group members explain and defend their visions, with me as the objective party. I might be able to point out good reasons why one approach will work and not the other. Usually issues can be resolved. On the rare occasion that differences can't be easily resolved, I allow the entire group to incorporate both approaches as an alternative to just one activity. For example, one person in the group might want to hold a celebrity ball as a fundraiser, the other group member might want to hold a road race. This has only happened twice, and in both cases it worked out well. In one case, group members quickly realized why one approach wouldn't work, and, the other group presented two approaches-in this case a plan for an event-as alternatives.

I've only had one personality conflict that couldn't be resolved. Personality conflicts can be tough because some students haven't separated their school life from their social life. It's much easier to do that when you're the one getting paid to do the job instead of the one "paying" to do the job. I start by

giving my "you don't have to like each other, just work together" lecture. Almost always, students learn the give and take of working together. Groups can be fragile after a personality conflict is resolved, and I find I often have to intervene more than once during the class. Often, the group that experiences a personality or creative conflict ends up doing the best work. I think it's because they get their differences out in the open early. This group usually cares about the project and wants to do well.

The irresponsible or absent team member is the most common problem with group projects. I've found that team members won't put up with doing more than their fair share for long. After three or four-no shows or missed deadlines, team members begin to look at the bottom line -- their grades. Most team members don't mind the extra work, but they want to get credit for doing it. Moreover, they don't want the absentee team member to get the same grade as they get. As I said in my syllabus statement, team members get the same grade, unless I have reason to believe a team member deserves a different grade (usually a lower one). After the first complaint, I monitor the team closely. I also e-mail or call the delinquent student to find out what's going on. Is he or she sick, having personal problems or a family situation that affects his or her academic activities? I usually try to schedule a conference with the student. If the behavior continues, I dismiss the student from the team. It's extremely important to be honest with the student. He or she should come away from this experience having learned something about responsibility. Without violating any confidences -- who complained about him or her and what they said -- I explain the problem and his or her options.

Now the question becomes, what to do with the former team member. With the understanding that this incident will affect his or her class-participation grade, we work together to come up with a project that incorporates most of the principles of the group project. This project must be different from the group project assignment so the student must start from scratch.

Unfortunately, because the individual is usually not the most dedicated student, often he or she doesn't produce the best work. One student ended up dropping the class.

Fortunately, negative experiences are the exception rather than the rule. Most teams work well together and produce impressive work. Many students produce work that can be used for their job search. I also find that some students actually take group projects more seriously than other kinds of classroom assignments.

When final presentation day arrives, I have students evaluate each group and write a self-evaluation. It's helpful to get other points of view when evaluating presentations. I'm usually impressed with the quality and creativity of my student's projects.

Since I've shared some of my experiences about group projects, I would love to hear suggestions from other faculty members.✿

Gladys Mckie teaches in the School of Journalism

To Give Final Exams or Not to Give Final Exams - The Case for Finals - Langdon D. Clough

Through my years of teaching at various colleges, it has been asked repeatedly of me by students, "Do I have to take the Final Exam?" Since my syllabi clearly state that the performance on the final examination is calculated into the course grade, I can't imagine why students would think that they should be exempted. I always reply with incredulity "Yes!"

I am well aware that many professors release students who are "performing" at an "A" level from the rigors or tedium of preparing for and taking the final examination. Their thinking is that students who are performing at a high level throughout the course have proven their ability to master the material and that the final exam is a redundancy. I believe that this action serves to demonstrate to the rest of the class that the final exam is in not integral part of the course. It is to be considered a nuisance to the instructor...something only to be administered to those who have "failed to muster up" to the teacher's standards of excellence. While it is enjoyable to have a few less exams to review before the semester break, I have always felt that not having a final exam is detrimental to the educational process.

A final examination (presumably cumulative and comprehensive in scope) is vital part of any introductory or survey course. * By requiring all students to thoroughly review the entire body of course materials as a single unit, several goals can be furthered. First, the probability that the underlying paradigms of the discipline will be revealed is increased. Second, new insights into both the nature and meaning of the study material can be made by the students through the review process. And finally, there is even the likelihood that a greater portion of the information will be retained for a bit longer after the course ends, increases dramatically.

Traditionally, the final examination is perceived as a strictly summative evaluation tool. It measures how well the students have managed to master the terms and concepts of the course. They are rated on the basis of their ability to memorize the material and the vast majority of the students will say goodbye to the course and the professor. The grades are filed and the exam retired to be used at the end of the next term to those who need it. While it certainly serves as measure of the attainment of course competencies, this is a vast waste of the precious resources of time and study.



As a Formative Evaluation tool, the final exam is often overlooked because it is given at the course terminus. This assumes however, that the course is fixed and not subject to revision. Any teacher worthy of the title continually revises courses; to incorporate new information, to provide more effective examples and exercises, etc. Properly reviewed, it can gauge the effectiveness of both the course tools and teaching effectiveness. Even the cumulative multiple choice examination administered to large sections can reveal where the professor has succeeded in imparting understanding or knowledge of each module of the course, and what sections are not being successfully retained by the students. To refuse students from participating in the process deprives them and the instructor from the opportunity to gain the benefits and insights of this process.*

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(Footnote):* Courses which are of an advanced or limited focus usually incorporate research papers or projects which accomplish the same goals. The focus here is on the introductory course which offers the student a broad survey of the discipline and requires the absorption of a large amount of concepts, terms, names, formulas, etc.

To Give Final Exams or Not To Give Final Exams - Consider An Alternative to Final Exams

- Felicia Lassk

In my Marketing Research courses (MKT U401), in lieu of a final exam, I have the students turn in their final written report during finals week. In brief, the Marketing Research course provides an overview of the marketing research process and it is a required course for all marketing concentrators. A major requirement of the course is a semester long "hands-on," team-based, descriptive research project. Students are required to work with a real client to identify a problem to investigate, prepare a research proposal, design a questionnaire, collect 100 surveys, and utilize SPSS software to statistically analyze the data. Once completed, each team then presents the results via oral and written communication.

The marketing research project is used because it is a realistic application of the marketing research process. The teams actually accomplish the tasks, presentations, and challenges that mirror those faced by experts in the marketing research field. In addition, by applying the components of the marketing research project, the students use the course information in a way that reveals their level of competence with the material. The students must use their problem solving, critical thinking, and statistical skills to accomplish the project. In essence, the project is a real world demonstration of their marketing research knowledge.

While the final report is due during finals week, the project develops over the course of the semester. Setting up deadlines throughout the semester for each component (research proposal, questionnaire draft, draft final report, oral presentation, and final written report) allows me to place emphasis on the process as well as the written outcome. At each stage of the project, students are provided with clear expectations usually communicated by PowerPoint slides (in class and stored on Blackboard). By not having the students prepare for both a final exam and the final project, they can focus solely on the oral and written report. This semester, a class completed over 800 self-administered surveys on behalf of the Boston Public Library (BPL). This study will help BPL management decide whether to provide a new offering, and if so, the offering's content suggested by patrons. Additionally, this project encompasses Northeastern University's values of practice-oriented, student-centered, and urban by integrating classroom learning with a real-world problem. Since these reports are delivered to an actual client, I also prefer that the students do the best job they can since in effect, these reports do reflect on the work of Northeastern University

students. In addition, client presentations permit the students to receive immediate feedback.

One consideration for conducting the real world project is that it can be very time consuming on both the students and faculty. Given that this is a semester long project, time management skills are needed. In addition, everyone needs to be somewhat flexible with deadlines since clients may not be able to quickly provide needed information or feedback to a team. Grading of the final reports can also be time consuming. Typically, each team report takes approximately 2.5 - 3 hours to grade. In contrast, grading 70 or more essay exams in the short period of time between the final exam and when grades are due would take even more time.

Overall, the final report provides a written document illustrating the students' marketing research knowledge. The marketing research process integrates an application of content knowledge with critical thinking, problem solving, statistical analysis, and communication skills culminating in the final written report. *

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Do YOU have an opinion on a teaching issue or decision? Tell us about it!

You can e-mail Teaching Matters c/o Kuheli Dutt at k.dutt@neu.edu.



Empowering Student Learning: Expressions From Within the Fold

- Emmett G. Price III

Discerning between the practice of teaching and the desired result of student learning is one of the most challenging considerations of teaching. Educators often allocate a great amount of time and energy towards expanding tools, skills and strategies for teaching, yet fail to designate the same time, energy and attention to assessing student learning. Most often educators hold fast to the assumption that the result of good teaching is effective learning. We often assure ourselves that if we become the best teachers that we can be, our students will reciprocally become better learners. This assumption is false. As we propel further into the 21st century, the failure to recognize this false assumption reveals itself in sour student experiences in the classroom and rotten relationships between student(s) and professor(s).

Because student learning happens on an individual basis, it is rather difficult if not impossible to offer a one size fits all equation to optimize student learning. However, the growing trends and tendencies of today's college students with respect to popular culture allow some insight and suggestion to possible needs and perhaps desires of students that will assist them in becoming better learners. On our part as educators, learning the individual student is a rather difficult, time consuming and often overwhelming task. It also may be impossible depending on the discipline or field of study. The competing goals and agenda of the greater university sometimes stand in the way of smaller more intimate class sizes and other optimal teaching situations (from the perspective of student learning). Nevertheless, careful consideration of classroom environment, assigned reflection writing exercises and refreshing our grading policies can greatly encourage more effective learning and in the process better transmit knowledge, wisdom and understanding, regardless of discipline or field of study.

In college, I had a math professor who made the blackboard look like a canvas as he painted layers of numbers, signs, symbols and notes endeavoring to solve life's greatest challenges through the power of numbers. He entered class each day with a slightly rolled newspaper and a fresh anecdote that related the study of mathematics to current events. A great majority of students (out of a class of 350 students) sat riveted on the edge of our seats waiting to hear either wise words of this great philosopher or a new source of erratic laughter from the comic without a punch line, before we embarked on the collective journey of saving the world through numbers during the class period. For that hour and a half session, many of us forgot the difficulty of the subject matter and focused more on the importance of the subject. He encouraged and aided our learning by creating an empowering environment. Mathematics had a definitive place in the world and its importance and necessity was especially visible. Through his witty opening soliloquy at the beginning of class, he created an environment that sparked effective student learning.

I once had an anthropology professor who was a great communicator and a very spirited and skilled scholar, but I just could not get excited for her class. Besides my lack of enthusiasm, she assigned a girth of reading and weekly two hundred and fifty word reflection writing assignments. The assignments were to address the weekly challenges of the course mentioning specific struggles, successes and failures. My first two assignments dealt with my struggle to become enthusiastic about the course; I was a graduating senior taking my last elective. Needless to say after seventy five words of rambling about my disinterest in the course, I was somehow compelled to comment on how the course material was actually important to everyday life and how many of the concepts learned were applicable in real life situations. My commentaries, in retrospect spoke more to what I had learned rather than ranting about the assignment. The assignments sparked new interest and tapped unknown and hidden secrets within myself igniting a new flame and channel of learning.

Then there's the one student we've all had who completely bombs the first scheduled exam, whether because (s)he was ill-prepared, whether life's journey took him/her down the wrong path prior to the test or whether the numerous hours of study simply led to greater confusion with no time or energy for repair. Receiving that grade is a painful and often overwhelming moment. The immortal words, "I grade on improvement" can be the life changing words that give the slain student a new lease on life, renewed interest in rising to a new level of achievement and more importantly the desire to effectively learn the material. I hold the notion that grades should reflect the level of student learning over the course of a certain amount of time (a semester). Some students learn faster, some learn slower. Some students require visual aides, some prefer tangible aides. Some hit the course with full steam and end in a fizzle, others begin bewildered, lost and intimidated and finish in exceptional fashion. Each student's path to learning is different and should be graded as such.

Empowering student learning is a nebulous endeavor which challenges the very notion of teaching. It is work that demands much time and is hardly ever recognized, commended or appreciated by students or the university. Most of this work happens far below the radar of the tenure and/or promotion process. So, as we continue to upgrade our teaching skills let us also focus adequate time to evaluating student learning for in the long run it is that which the students learn that is much more valuable than how we get them to learn it.☼

Emmett G. Price III is an Assistant Professor of Music and African American Studies. He is also on the CEUT Advisory Board.

Evaluating Student Learning In A Service-Learning Course

- Kristen Simonelli

One of the greatest concerns of faculty preparing to incorporate service-learning into their course is how to evaluate and or grade students on their service-learning. For the last five years, the Center of Community Service has been supporting faculty in answering this question, and in also preparing for every aspect of the implementation process. Support provided by the Center begins with ensuring that there is an understanding of the basics principles and definition of Service-Learning. Service-Learning is defined as a "credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding on course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

It is important to have a clear understanding of, and plan for incorporating, the basic principles into the syllabus, partnerships and action. The "Principles of Good Practice in Community Service-Learning Pedagogy" included in Jeffrey Howard's (1993), *Praxis I: A Faculty Casebook on Community Service-Learning*, provide a helpful guide. Many of the principles speak to evaluating student learning in a service-learning course. First is the principle that "academic credit is for learning, not for service" (Howard, ed., 1993). Faculty can incorporate this idea into their evaluation process by utilizing two forms of feedback. One is the community partner's evaluation of the student, and second is the student's expression of how the service experiences have increased his/her understanding of the course content through the various academic mechanisms used to harvest what the student has learned (Howard, ed., 1993). Examples of the latter feedback include exams, research papers, presentations, video productions, skits, and journals.

There are two ways to use the evaluation(s) completed by the community partner so that students' service is not specifically being evaluated and graded. Students must understand and take part in defining the learning goals, which should "minimize the distinction between the student's community learning role and the classroom

learning role" (Howard, ed., 1993). The evaluation(s) can then be used to determine whether each student has fulfilled his/her commitment to serve by actually spending the estimated quantity of time necessary with the organization to acquire the knowledge they claim through reflection. Second, the evaluation(s) will aid in determining if the depth of the quality of the students experience based on the community partners feedback about how proactive the student was in harvesting the community learning for themselves throughout their service (Howard, ed., 1993). This usually translates into the organizations evaluation stating that a student actively inquired about their service role, the broader role of the organization and showed a genuine interest in the clients and community beyond the specific tasks they were assigned.

Community partners are often acutely aware of which students simply comply with the responsibilities of the service tasks and which students put in the effort to provide quality service and express a desire and proactive approach to learning from the experience. With this principle still in mind, the purpose is not to evaluate whether one student was successful in finding an apartment for a client or not. It is more important to determine through the academic tools used for reflection and evaluation, whether the service-learning student was able to express that they met and or exceeded the learning goals. What should be taken into consideration is whether the student fulfilled his/her role as a resource, and that there is an understanding of why that role is needed, how that role connects with the organizations mission and course content, how their service may be impacting the client, organization and community, how this service connects to their discipline, and how this experience effects their understanding of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

As much as relying on the perspective of the community partner may take one out of their comfort zone, "maximizing the community responsibility orientation of the course," partnering with, and giving the organization a responsibility of supervising and evaluating ones students is critical to the success of the experience for all (Howard, ed., 1993). If an organization does not

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understand or agree to support students in achieving their learning goals through service, then the process will be corrupt from the start and students will most likely be used as traditional volunteer. Relying on multiple forms of feedback to use in evaluating student learning may also produce "uncertainty and variations in student learning outcomes" (Howard, ed., 1993). This is to be expected, however, in service-learning courses because students are serving in different roles, environments and being effected by their experiences in ways that can not be measured by standards reserved to the confines of a classroom (Howard, ed., 1993). Service-learning challenges students to experience the real world through the scope of their responsibility as a student. And just as students are expected to rethink their roles as learners, the instructional role a faculty member is accustomed to may also need to be revised to accommodate the new information, perspectives and methods of evaluation they will need to utilize to evaluate student learning in service-learning courses (Howard, ed., 1993).

These service-learning principles give a glimpse into how thoughtful one needs to be throughout the process of implementing service-learning into a course. Preparation and continuous adjustments may be necessary before the many principles of best practice are realized, but the benefits to students, faculty, community

partners, and the university are well worth the effort. The Center of Community Service is available to support faculty, students and community partners throughout this process. Faculty interested in receiving support from the Center can begin by applying for the Faculty Service-Learning Course Development Grant. This support includes assistance in determining the most appropriate partnerships and resolution to questions of this type, as well as funding to aid in covering costs associated with implementing service-learning into their course(s). If you have questions or if service-learning is of interest to you please contact Kristen Simonelli at k.simonelli@neu.edu, extension: 7883, and or visit the Center's web site at <http://communityservice.neu.edu>. ☼

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Kristen Simonelli is Associate Director and Service Learning Coordinator of Government Relations and Community Affairs



Photo: Craig Bailey

Northeastern tutor (unidentified) and Brandon Geese work together.



The purpose of the Jonas Chalk "Chalk Talk" column is to initiate a dialogue on best practices, successes, and frustrations in teaching. (Although the concerns covered are often universal, we do put a particular emphasis on the challenges and rewards of teaching freshmen.) This column hopes to stimulate, engage and occasionally nudge professors to share their wisdom and ideas about the best ways to achieve outstanding learning outcomes in. Readers can submit letters, questions, or ideas that you have to jchalk@coe.neu.edu.

Recent Jonas columns can be accessed at: <http://gemasterteachers.neu.edu/documents/documents.html>

If you would like to subscribe to the weekly Jonas e-column, contact Jonas at jchalk@coe.neu.edu with your e-mail address and put "subscribe" in the subject line.

GRADING CLASS PARTICIPATION



Dear Jonas,

I feel an important part of learning in my class is for students to be active. I expect them to be prepared (through reading and homework) to answer questions, ask me for clarification, as well as tackle work individually and in pairs. So I included on my syllabus that participation counts as 15% of their final grade. Now I'm not quite sure how to evaluate that. One of my colleagues tells me that she never grades participation, as that would come down to grading personalities; outgoing students would get more points than quiet students. Someone else told me that he no longer grades participation because it led students to talk about nonsense just to say something. Yet another makes participation nearly half of the final grade, because he feels that the work students do in class is as important as what they do outside. Should I grade participation at all? If so, how?

- Pensive on Participation

Dear Pensive,

As you point out, active involvement by students can greatly enhance the learning environment in the classroom. Active learning increases what is remembered and gives students more opportunities to think about the applications of what they have learned in new situations. By asking students to explain their thoughts to you and to their peers, they learn more by having to articulate their understanding and often offer new insights to other students in the process.

By making participation part of the grade, you can emphasize the importance of active learning, but grading class participation is one of the most difficult aspects of student evaluation. It is common for professors to determine participation grades according to subjective impressions, so that this component is used largely as a "fudge factor"

in determining the final course grade. This sort of grading can be useless or even detrimental when the students have no guidance from the instructor on how to improve the quality of their participation. Such a grade often depends on the student's personality with more introverted students at a disadvantage.

If you decide to grade on participation (and since you've already put it on the syllabus, you have little choice now) you may want to begin with a brief brainstorming exercise to determine what students feel are the qualities of meaningful class discussion that adds to their learning. This sets the stage for the introduction of your participation guidelines. The process of grading participation can be made more constructive and objective by the use of scoring rubrics.

Here is one example (from "Grading Class Participation", Prof. Martha L. Mazneveski, Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants, University of Virginia, Spring 1996):

0: Absent

1: Tries to respond when called, but does not offer much. Demonstrates very infrequent involvement in discussion.

2: Demonstrates adequate preparation. Offers straightforward information without elaboration. Demonstrates sporadic involvement in discussion.

3: Demonstrates good preparation. Offers interpretation and analysis. Responds to other students constructively. Demonstrates consistent ongoing involvement

4: Demonstrates excellent preparation. Offers analysis and synthesis. Puts together pieces of the discussion to develop new approaches.

It is important to explain your rubric to your students at the start of the semester, and to offer constructive feedback on how to improve their participation as the semester progresses. Midterm feedback can be done with memos or conferences which give the students their interim participation grades and which take the opportunity to reiterate the four-point scoring method.

There are several techniques to make sure that less outgoing students participate. You can use the technique of "cold calling", where you ask a question and call on a particular student to respond. In math, science, and engineering courses, students can be asked to explain in class the solutions to assigned problems. It is also possible to broaden the definition of classroom participation to include on-line discussions and postings. This is a more comfortable form of expression for some more taciturn students, and it also has the advantage of leaving a record for you to evaluate.

The record-keeping required for the participation grade can present a significant challenge. If you have a small enough class, you can assign a number from the four-point scale to each student after each class meeting. For larger classes, there will not be the opportunity for each student to participate in each class meeting, and you will have to accumulate statistics over the semester. Some professors like to use a set of 3x5 cards (one per student) to select the students for cold calls and then to record the participation score.

For large lecture classes, these grading techniques quickly become unwieldy. In these cases, it is practical to use more formal assessment mechanisms like end-of-class quizzes or short essays on the material discussed in class. These can test the students' preparations, and if carefully constructed, they can help to teach the students to analyze and synthesize the lecture material.

Grading student class participation can be a meaningful way to promote critical thinking and assess student learning as long as the grading guidelines are clear from the beginning and the students receive feedback on their participation so they can improve.

Good Luck,

Jonas

Scholarship Reconsidered - *Reconsidered!*

November 19, 2004

Call for Abstracts

The Center for Effective University Teaching will sponsor a symposium and poster session to showcase the work of Northeastern faculty who are engaged in the **Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)**. You are invited to submit an abstract of your scholarly work as a teacher. Abstracts from all disciplines and fields of study are requested.

In 1990, Ernest Boyer from the Carnegie Foundation wrote a seminal book called *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professorate*. In his book, Boyer calls for higher education to end the debate over scholarship versus teaching and to look at our work in a different light. True scholarship, Boyer tells us, is measured by the ability to think, communicate and learn. He defines **The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning** as scholarly teachers having a theoretical frame to their teaching practice which includes the planning, examining, refining, and studying of their practice; they disseminate their knowledge to peers for critical review and feedback; and they are risk takers, willing to innovate to continually engage a changing student body.

This symposium and poster session will highlight the many examples of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning that are practiced by Northeastern faculty.

The symposium will feature a keynote address by Dr. Arthur Ellis, Division Director for Chemistry at the National Science Foundation and the Meloche-Bascom Professor of Chemistry at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Professor Ellis received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1989 and the American Chemical Society's George C. Pimentel Award in Chemical Education in 1997. He co-organized a National Science Foundation workshop on the impact of technology on undergraduate mathematics and physical sciences and has served on the National Research Council's Committee on Undergraduate Science Education from 1998-2000.

Professor Ellis's talk will be followed by podium presentations of four selected abstracts which exemplify SoTL at Northeastern. Peer reviewed accepted abstracts will be exhibited in an afternoon poster session.

ABSTRACT OUTLINE:

Abstracts can be mailed to the Center for Effective University Teaching at 225 Hayden Hall or sent electronically to d.qualters@neu.edu. Abstracts should be no more than 250 words and should include the following:

1. Author's information, including name, title, address, e-mail and phone
2. Title of the Presentation
3. Origin and development of the scholarly teaching activity
4. Objectives of the project
5. Innovative methods utilized to achieve objectives
6. Assessment/evaluation/outcomes of project
7. Conclusions and recommendations drawn from SoTL project

Abstracts are due **September 30, 2004**. Notification of acceptance will be October 22, 2004.



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