Faculty Conversations About Teaching

In our April 2018 faculty conversation, we will discuss how to plan, create, or revise courses, assignments, materials and teaching.

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My Opening Idea or Definitions

Provide a 50-150 word opening statement with your understanding of the most interesting or important aspects of this topic (to you and your teaching).

The most important aspect of course redesign is that it reinforces the notion that good teaching reflects purposeful planning and effort. Too often, people imagine that good teaching reflects an ontological condition of the person doing the teaching – some people are "good teachers" and some are not. In my experience, this position is untenable. Good teaching reflects determined effort, with focus on what the teachers wants to impart, how the teacher is going to measure student learning, and how to guide the students toward success on the assessment.

__Thinking like an assessor:__ Teachers often imagine themselves as subject area specialists. Whereas they are, they must also imagine themselves in another way: as an assessor of student learning. From this perspective, the focus of attention of the teacher shifts somewhat away from content and rather to how student learning of the content will be measured. This change in emphasis may seem small, yet it leads to (or should lead to) big changes in practice.

What Have I Tried?

Summarize 3-4 approaches, emphases, scenarios, or assignments, each briefly explained (50-100 words each) so that participants can envision your past and/or current teaching experiences, whether successful or still evolving.

- *__Teaching for divergence:__* The singularly most profound experience I have had with respect to my teaching stemmed from working with (now retired) professor of education here at GMU, Lloyd Duck. Like many young teachers, I focused on whether my students were learning the material, the content. Thus, I imagined my instruction as a process of transferring my knowledge to them. Dr. Duck emphasized, rather, that having students engage with material in an open-ended way led them to think harder about the material, which then registered in the long-term memory. Nervous about this approach, I nonetheless tried it and found that student performance on external exams actually went up.

- ***Application:*** I routinely use application activities in class. An application activity occurs when students have learned a concept, but their knowledge lacks depth (is at the bottom of Bloom's taxonomy). Then, I will present some kind of scenario where the students must then apply the concept. Then we will de-brief. Sometimes the application is for convergence (one right answer), sometimes for divergence (more than one right answer). Regardless, the students get to cycle the concept through their thinking several times, which reinforces the learning. The different scenarios provide a higher-order thinking context, which moves the students up Bloom's taxonomy.

- ***Physical movement:*** My preference is always for classrooms with wraparound white boards. One of the ways to reinforce learning is have students to engage physically, which can be done in many ways. The wrap around white boards provide for many of these physically moving activities.

What Am I Exploring? What Am I Interested In?

Provide a list of 3-4 questions, activities, or options that you have been considering as you continue to adapt your teaching approaches.

Precision in learning objectives: Too often, learning objectives, especially in courses taught by multiple teachers, have weak learning objectives. This problem stems from issue of writing objectives that make everyone happy. The result, unfortunately, is that the SLOs are often the proverbial lowest common denominator. However, when we think like an assessor, we need great clarity about learning targets, the SLOs. They need to be precise, focused, achievable, and agreed upon.

> ➤ **The challenge:** overcoming faculty resistance to "compromising" their expertise in the name of developing these SLOs?

Using stimulus in assessment: So often, professors claim that they want to prepare students for life, for the world. In their assessments, however, the professors often remain purely theoretical. Some place exists for purely theoretical work: after all, half of the scientific method rests on deduction (reason), a skill that can be developed. The other half, however, is inductive and evidence-based and draws on stimulus. We at times need to replicate that in our assessments: provide stimulus for students to apply concepts to, analyze, and evaluate.

> ➤ **The challenge:** coming up with meaningful and appropriately challenging stimulus that (a) stimulates student thinking without giving the answer completely away and (b) allows for questions both for convergence and divergence.

Seeing the best in students: Teachers complain. They complain about their institution, their colleagues, and their students (and about many other things). Of course, it is easy to complain, especially as we get older and more distance exists between where we are intellectually and in terms of lifestyle (I am think here especially with respect to social media).

What we must realize is that each student wants to be successful (just as the "pain-in-the-neck" colleagues wants to be successful), and no one wants a bad grade. What may appear as a bad attitude or resistance to learning reflects something else – fear, anxiety, poor social skills (but not knowing what good social skills are), etc. As teachers, we must embrace their good intentions, however hidden they may be.

> ➢ **_The challenge:_** overcoming anger, frustration, and impatience with eighteen to twenty-two year olds who sometimes (often?) seem to resist common-sense steps to enhance their learning (coming to class, putting down the phone, doing the reading, etc.).