Faculty Conversations About Teaching

Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning
Digital Learning • Teaching Excellence

In our faculty conversation, we will share steps and strategies for identifying your achievements, selecting supporting documents, and writing statements to more fully represent your teaching accomplishments.

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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).

My first comprehensive experience creating a tactile teaching portfolio was in preparation for the teaching excellence award. I had a one-page personal teaching philosophy that I needed to expand to include more detail. Taking an inventory of my last six years of teaching was daunting, from going through past syllabi, assignments, photos, Blackboard and emails, but it was a great reminder of how much fun I have been having as an adjunct instructor here at GMU, as well as the challenges of learning which project works and which ones required a rework. Course redesign is actually one of my favorite tasks, but you have to the "old" materials to compare new ideas to, and when the new format works the way you imagine, it is so rewarding.

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.

GCH 376: Health, Ethics, Leadership, and Advocacy:

Along with Dr. Laura Poms and Dr. Patrice Winter, I have been redesigning this course since last summer, to create a more active learning approach. Both Laura and I are ALT classroom qualified (although, as an adjunct, I have not yet been able to teach in a room), and we have taught this course using both the traditional, dynamic style, as well in a flipped/hybrid. Last semester, this course was offered fully hybrid, but this year, it is dynamic, as we are still testing assignments and projects. One of the best changes that we have made to the "process" of this course has been to scaffold our "legislative" assignments

leading up to the "big" end legislative project, as well as give students a clear idea of "why" we are including the various steps. I have also included a number of low-stakes, small group collaborative discussions, and also empowered students to take action as their own agents of change, actually mailing or emailing their legislators to act upon legislation (versus a "mock" action, simply submitted only on Blackboard). Students in this class have also mentioned that starting the day with a writing prompt question or questions on the whiteboards is "fun." I will often have 5-6 questions on the board, to get them thinking about the topic of the day, along with a pile of colorful dry erase markers. They know they should come in and get settled, consider the questions, and then come up and jot down some thoughts before we get rolling. Again, with no names attached, their responses carry anonymity, which is also low-stakes, particularly if the questions are controversial or sensitive in nature.

GCH/SOCW 445: Social Determinants of Health

This course is fantastic to teach, as it is a combined classroom of both community health students and social work students, and we learn from each other. In this course, there are many low-stakes collaborative discussions and action assignments, in which groups will research and prepare a particular discussion topic and then "teach it" to the rest of the class, i.e. learning about gentrification together as a group, researching examples, taking a stand on whether it is positive or negative, and then sharing their findings with the class and why they think it is "good or bad." Each week, a different social determinant subject is the focus, also helping students to decide which topic they may want to focus on for the "big" end project, the issue brief. They also have 6 thought papers due throughout the semester, on their choice of topics. In past semesters, I had 8-11 thought papers due, and that proved to be overwhelming for students, as well as the too-flexible topics and due dates. I have already found that this semester's 6 means that students feel better prepared and less anxious about writing and submit more complex work, and they only have a choice of a small selection of topics for each one. This course also "requires" community engagement. Since I have had a student or two in past semesters "complain" about not having the time to get out and volunteer, I do have a couple of "alternative" assignments. This also helps to ensure that certain opportunities are accommodating to students with disabilities, transportation issues, or family obligations. The alternative assignment is, however, "more work." For the students whom take advantage of the Experiential Learning Activity, they find that the time and effort to volunteer in the community and reflect on the experience via a required journal, is rewarding and often leads to valuable networking connections for future internships and jobs. I also utilize speakers throughout the semester, to get students thinking about the different populations they will work with in their future careers or programs, and which ones may resonate with them best. Each year, I try to "change up" the speakers and the content, to ensure relevance and to make sure I do not "burn out" community partners.

GCH 360: Health and Environment

This course was the topic of my "course as a case study" for my teaching portfolio at Stearns. Although I am not teaching it this semester, I consider this course to be "my baby," as it most closely relates to my graduate fieldwork and thesis. As with GCH/SOCW 445, I put a strong emphasis in this course on practical experience in the field, offering countless opportunities for students to engage in environmentalism in the community. Since it is difficult to require undergraduates to "be someplace" other than the classroom during the regularly scheduled time or require time outside of the class period, I offer most of these opportunities for extra credit. Because of the number of students who took advantage of the opportunities to clean up local streams, test local waterways for *E.coli*, count benthic macroinvertebrates to gauge pollution, hike local parks, teach elementary students about conservation, and so on, I created a Facebook page for students to spotlight their community service and projects. I also selected outstanding student papers to be featured on a website, which has been a helpful writing portfolio and writing sample builder for students. When I first taught this course, I stuck very closely to the lecture and test, or lecture and write format, but it was clear that students were bored. So, each semester, I tried different approaches, from writing prompt assignments, reflecting on the lecture and readings, to small group presentations, focusing on a different short-book on an environment-related topic. Again, with changing up the format every couple of semesters, the course also feels "fresh" to me, which makes it easy to be enthusiastic in the classroom and ensure students that I am up to date.

Whether it is a deliberate approach to collaboratively redesign a course or to simply try something new the next semester, from altering one assignment to changing up how we learn or discuss an entire topic, this can prevent both instructor burnout and student disconnect. Students have to see that you are excited about conveying the information, and they will often challenge you with current events or what they have learned in another class or at work, to ensure that the information is up to date. In our field, we cannot be stagnant, and I am always looking for new ways to teach even the most stable, historical, or theoretical information.

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 build your teaching portfolio.

1) Consider a topic or unit that you have been teaching for three or more semesters which has remained fairly consistent in terms of PowerPoint(s), lecture spiel, lecture style or assignments. Should it be updated? How do you determine when to do so? What are some of the ways you self-check your approach?
2) Are there any formative discussions, debates, role-playing, or other participatory activities that have fallen flat in your class? Do you think this was due to lack of student participation, perhaps because they were tired or because they didn't understand what was being asked of them? How did you combat this? Did you change the activity on the spot, cancel it, or explain it in a different way? Was the result better?
3) What is one activity or assignment that you have used to connect students with "real life" experience or opportunities to network, connect, or grow outside of the classroom? Is this something that is intuitive to your course, or something "extra" you do to ensure students can put what they have learned into praxis?
4) What are some approaches that you might use to engage students from the first few minutes of class time, so that they are ready to learn and participate? Do you have any "tricks" that you utilize, even mid-class, to check for understanding or ensure they are alert and attentive?

What are some Best Practices, Tips, or Resources I'd Like to Share with Other Faculty?
If you could recommend a list of 3 core values, teaching tips, and/or resources (articles, books, and links) that faculty across disciplines could find helpful to support multilingual learners, what would your list include?

Keep building your tactile portfolio and resume, even beyond the classroom. Take advantage of conferences, community partnerships, continuing education, and networking. You never know when a connection can lead to a speaker willing to come to your classroom or a connection that may lead you to represent GMU as an expert in your field. I enjoy checking with fellow faculty teaching the same courses, to see what they are using, in case I want to try it out in my classroom.

Get to know your students. I will be the first to admit that I cannot always put a face to a name, but I remember a face (eager or bored), and I also make note of those students whom are thirsting for opportunities and engagement beyond the classroom. I am constantly offering to connect students with community partners and networking opportunities, encouraging them to update their resumes and go to career fairs, and inviting them to help with research or volunteer projects, when available. Many students are nervous about both their personal and career trajectory after college, so helping them find connections can often help their anxiety. I also make sure they know that I can remind them of available campus resources, such as counseling and career services.

There are other ways to test, other than "the test." Of course, this is not always the case, depending on your course, but using the Checking for Understanding ideas sheet or even running through the list of Blooms/SLOs for ideas on how to otherwise "test" where students are in their comprehension can alleviate some of the anxieties that students have about memorizing everything so that they can do well. By "quizzing" in class, in a low-stakes way, I can mix higher-stakes tests and assignments, with those that they can do without a major penalty. This may be a "for your own information" preparation quiz at home, to see if they have comprehended material before they go to their flipped class, or asking questions out loud to them and then calling on certain sections of the class (rather than on individuals) for the answers. It still makes them "wake up" and take notice (perhaps in fear they will be called upon), but also because they can check themselves against what others seem to know (especially if they don't).