



THE Teaching PROFESSOR

Volume 21, Number 6

June/July 2007

Things I Will and Won't Miss

I am just about to retire from Penn State and leave my faculty position teaching undergraduates. I'll still be working; there's this newsletter to edit and a world of faculty who still need advice, ideas, and encouragement to do their very best in the classroom. But you don't end 33 years of college teaching without thinking about those things that will and won't be missed on campus. Here's my list.

Things I'll miss

- The nervous **anticipation** of going to class, rehearsing **my** lines as I drive to campus, **thinking about** all that's possible, believing **that** I just might be able to make some of it happen.
- Those days in class when students get it. Sometimes that new understanding shines from their **faces**, sometimes they make a comment that attests to how well they've got it, and sometimes they report the details in a paper. Sometimes they give you credit. Even if **they** don't, it's still an event worthy of witness.
- Those days in class when I get it. When I see how to connect **content** to students; efforts to **learn** to appropriate **processes**; and students to the insights, ideas, and motivation of other students.
- Seeing seniors at **graduation** and remembering how they looked that first day of their first semester in college.
- Watching students **who** started out failing or doing poorly learning to succeed.
- Colleagues whose passion for teaching spreads enough hot coals to light new fires and rekindle **others** when their **embers** burn low or die out.
- Colleagues who use their fine minds, keen intellects, and inquisitive sensibilities to **tackle** teaching and **learning** with intellectual robustness.
- Students so **full** of excuses there's no room left for learning.
- Students with whom conversations never get past the points—those taken off, missed, totaled, awarded for extra credit, given, earned, **offered** as bonus, secured surreptitiously, or bought on **the black market**.
- Those days in class when I can't **make** it happen, when **my** best efforts don't **make** a difference. Those days when passivity, like fog, settles over the classroom, when **students** yawn and nod off and no amount of enthusiasm **cuts** through the chill of **complacency**—those days when only the cold signifies that this place isn't teaching **hell**.

Things I won't miss

- Those bright, capable students who don't care and won't make an **effort**. Those students **full** of potential who happily do work just barely **above** the line that marks acceptable.
- Colleagues who **have** given up on teaching and are **doing** time in the classroom—the ones **who've** locked themselves out of meaningful, trusting relationships by using policies and practices **that** render **all** encounters with students adversarial.
- Colleagues who blame students for **what they** aren't accomplishing as teachers.
- End-of-course ratings that ask irrelevant questions and give administrators data from which to draw dubious conclusions.
- Peer reviews **where** the Lake Wobegon effect devalues any teaching that is truly **above average**.
- Grading papers so full of **grammatical** errors that it's difficult to see beyond them to **the** ideas behind them.

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More Discussion—Less Lecture

(Although many of us would like to get

beyond lecturing, we often lack concrete strategies for doing so, particularly in our larger classes." (p. 236) David Yamane, who teaches sociology courses enrolling around 60 students, reports on a strategy he uses that has allowed him to reduce the amount of time he lectures from 80 percent to something a bit less than 30 percent. He has created and posts on the course Web page various course preparation assignments (CAPs). Successful discussion in class depends on students having read and thought about course material before they arrive in class. CAPs are the vehicle Yamane uses to get students engaged with course material before class.

Here's how CAPs work. Students read and think about a chapter or some other part of the textbook, and then they respond in writing using the same CAP format each time they prepare one of these assignments. Each CAP begins with an introductory statement, followed by an objective for the assignment, some relevant background information, and then the writing assignment that students complete. There's a sample CAP included in an appendix at the end of the article. It's about racial inequality. After reading and reviewing information on the CAP, students are instructed to generate five testable hypotheses that they believe might account for a specified set of income differences.

Students arrive in class with the CAP completed. Yamane might have them start the discussion in small groups where students pool and integrate their answers. Groups might then report one of their findings to the whole class. Often their analysis is superficial or flawed. Yamane then presents more explanatory material and sends students back their group to incorporate and respond to this new information. To prevent CAP discussions from becoming stale, Yamane regularly changes the routine. Some days students may role-play; other days they may debate different sides or "interrogate" each other's proposals.

Yamane believes that the success of this strategy depends on careful construction of the CAPs. He points out that discussion often falters because students don't see the point. That's why objectives are an important part of the CAP itself and become an emphasis of the in-class discussion. Another key to success is the questions asked on the CAP. They need to be authentic—questions without prespecified answers and questions that allow students to offer opinions, points of view, or information. "An authentic question has an indeterminate number of 'right' or acceptable answers." (p. 240)

How does Yamane "motivate" students to complete the CAPs? If they don't attend class, they get no credit for completing a CAP. If they are in class, CAPs are graded on a credit/no credit basis. The size of the class rules out close grading. "I simply try to ensure that students have made some serious effort to complete the assignments." (p. 241) Before starting to deduct credit, Yamane gives students a warning. In one class of 60, students completed 18 CAPs and he gave only five written warnings. The warning was enough to move the quality of students' work up to an acceptable level in all cases.

Yamane used a variety of different assessment methods to ascertain the effectiveness of this move away from lectures to discussion. He compared the discussion course with the same course taught by him in the more traditional way. He found some intriguing differences. For example, a bit over 50 percent of the students in the lecture course thought the responsibility for class being successful on a daily basis was primarily the professor's. In the discussion course 75 percent thought the responsibility was divided evenly between the professor and students. In the lecture course just about 53 percent strongly agreed or agreed that hearing the views of other students was an important part of the course. That percentage jumped to almost 87 in the discussion course. And 88 percent in the discussion course agreed or strongly agreed that they benefited from

hearing the views and experiences of other students in the class. About 56 percent of students in the lecture class reported the same benefit.

Of special note was the effectiveness of the CAPs in increasing the amount of study time students reported devoting to the class. In the lecture class students on average reported spending 3.8 hours studying. In the discussion class the mean was 5.3 hours. And perhaps of most concern to faculty—What kind of effect did use of the CAPs have on exam performance? The average score on the first exam was 6 percent higher in the discussion section. It was 11 percent higher on the second exam.

Yamane writes in the conclusion, "These assignments have been a great success in my courses, allowing me to foster student engagement by spending the majority of class time coordinating, facilitating, and leading discussions, rather than constantly lecturing at students." (p. 246) He notes that he has used the strategy in undergraduate general education courses with enrollments of up to 85 students.

Reference: Yamane, D. (2006). Course preparation assignments: A strategy for creating discussion-based courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 36 (July), 236–248. ♡

THREE-OPTION FEEDBACK FROM PAGE 2

to stop using that textbook and write my own self-reflective prompts. I opted to use fewer of them and also to more tightly align them with course content and critical thinking objectives. Student response to these changes has been positive. As this example illustrates, students can provide instructors useful feedback. The format used to solicit their input directly impacts the quality of what they provide. ♡