The University of Western Australia

Issues of Teaching and Learning

A monthly publication for academic staff on issues of teaching and learning

http://www.catl.uwa.edu.au/IssuesofTandL.html

Issues of Teaching and Learning is a monthly publication for academic staff at the University of Western Australia on issues of teaching and learning. A print copy is sent to all academics at UWA (full and part-time) and is published concurrently on the Web at **http://www.catl.uwa.edu.au/IssuesofTandL.html**.

ITL has been published since 1995 and a searchable archive of past issues is available at that Web address. This poster highlights past issues of *ITL* that have focussed on the student.

Focussing on the student - *Excerpts from Issues of Teaching and Learning*

Using group projects or student learning teams: Some questions to prompt effective practice

The decision to use student learning teams or group projects

Why is a team or group project being used? Will it advance the unit objectives? Will it enhance student learning? How will it affect student and/or instructor workloads? What is your understanding on how teams work, the potential issues that might arise and how to deal with them?

Constructing the teams

What is the optimum size of the teams? What do individuals bring to a team? How is diversity reflected in the teams? Are the teams self-selected, assigned randomly by the instructor or assigned by the instructor to account for diversity (gender, skills, cultural background, experience, age, etc)? Where there is a minority in the class, should members of this minority group be spread around the groups?

Preparing students for working in teams

Do students understand what is meant by cooperative/collaborative learning? Do they know how working in teams might be beneficial? Do they understand the resistance to working in teams and the problems that arise in working in teams? Will the students be given information on team building and group processes? Will the teams be provided with team operating guidelines or encouraged to develop their own? Has in-class time been set aside for team work on the project, especially for each team's first meeting?

Monitoring the team process

How will the teams be monitored? Will there be regular peer/feedback on the team process? Will progress reports be required (assessed, not assessed)? How will internal team conflict be dealt with? What will be the last resort for team failures? Have you thought about the unforeseen and how you will deal with it?

Assessing student learning

How will the project be presented – oral presentation, poster, written submission, other? How will the marks be assigned between team members? Will they be able to have input into the allocation of marks? Will there be peer- and self-assessment in addition to instructor assessment? Will there be a mix of instructor-assigned marks and student-assigned marks? Will the team process and student understanding of teamwork be assessed? How is collaboration distinguished from cheating?

Evaluating the team process

What mechanism is in place to evaluate the team process and give feedback to the students? How will the feedback be incorporated into future team projects?

The Challenges of Group Assignments. (2000). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 6(10)

How students adapt to learning contexts

Deep/surface/achieving approaches

Learning approaches consist of learning style and learning motivation. A surface approach combines a motivation to meet requirements minimally with a reproducing strategy. A deep approach combines a motivation to be competent in a subject with a meaning focused strategy. An achieving approach combines a motivation to achieve the highest grade with a strategy based on organised time and work. While deep and surface approaches are seen as a mutually exclusive, an achieving approach can be combined with either.

Biggs, J.B. (1987). *Student Approaches to Learning and Studying* (Research Monograph). Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.

Entwistle, N.J. & Ramsden, P. (1983). *Understanding Student Learning*. London: Croom Helm.

Holist/serialist strategies

These learning strategies are mutually exclusive and are adopted according to students' perception of a particular learning situation. Holists focus on the broad relationships and tend to describe the global picture, while serialists focus on narrow relationships and tend to describe the specifics.

Pask, G. (1976). Styles and Strategies of Learning. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 46*, 128-148.

Abstract/concrete and active/reflective orientations

An abstract orientation focuses on thinking, by using logic, concepts, analysis and generalisation. A concrete orientation focuses on personal experience through feeling, intuition and open-minded approach. An active orientation focuses on experimentation by applying knowledge to practical situations. A reflective orientation focuses on understanding through observation and searching for truth.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential Learning*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc.

Reception/discovery and rote/meaningful learning processes

In reception learning the entire content is presented to learner in its final form. In discovery learning the learning task involves independent discovery by the learner. Each can lead to rote or meaningful learning. Rote and meaningful learning processes are on a continuum.

Ausubel, D.P., Novak, J.D. & Hanesian, H. (1978). *Educational Psychology - A Cognitive View* (2nd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Which approaches/strategies/orientations do you promote/facilitate in your learners?

Towards a Glossary of Educational Terms. (1998). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 4(5)

Getting it down on paper

What can a student learn from writing when the writing doesn't come? What might cause page fright and what, if anything, could be done about it?

The character Phaedrus in *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance* (Pirsig, 1974) encourages a student experiencing such fear to narrow her focus from the nation to the main street in town to a building wall and finally to an individual brick; she then becomes unstuck and the writing begins to flow. He attributes her difficulty to an attempt at imitative rather than original expression, the latter having been learned in school.

Galbraith (1980) describes three goals of writing for students as expression, coherence and self-presentation. While the form of expression need not constrain the written product, the desire for coherence and the writer's self-image in a social context can result in a student who "*will not say what he thinks, but what he thinks he thinks, or, even more confusing, what he thinks he ought to think*" (p.365).

Samson and Radloff (1994) describe a "Mozart style" of writing that captures on paper ideas that are fully developed in the mind versus a "Beethoven style" of writing where ideas are developed as they are written, suggesting that the ability to write in either form is indicative of deep learning. Is page fright then an indicator of surface learning?

The UWA Support Center <**http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/**> provides some tips for undergraduate and postgraduate students about learning from writing, some of which help page fright, e.g.

- Your primary objective in the first draft is to get your ideas down on paper. Don't be too fussy about your writing at this stage.
- Revision should be done in stages, concentrating on argument, contents, structure and paragraphing and expression one at a time and separately.

Other forms of aid to student writing developed by departments/faculties at UWA include:

- Flexible Delivery of Academic Writing Tuition Project <**http://www.ecel.uwa.edu.au/~jrocheco/ACADWRIT/front.htm**>
- Scientific Communication 405 <**http://www.publishing.uwa.edu.au/handbooks/Ems/units233-405.html**>
- Academic Writing in English 409/509 <**http://www.publishing.uwa.edu.au/handbooks/education/gsei300-409-300-509.html**>
- English for Academic Purpose (EAP) <**http://colon5.ecel.uwa.edu.au/celt/course_info2.htm**>

Directing student attention to the need to separate the process and product of writing may help those who find that they are stuck. How do you and your department facilitate student writing?

Galbraith, D. (1980). The effect of conflicting goals on writing: A case study. *Visible Language*, XIV(4), 364-375.

Pirsig, R. M. (1974). *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*. London: Vintage.

Samson, J., & Radloff, A. (1994). *In Writing: A guide to writing effectively at the tertiary level*. Perth: Paradigm Books.

Making Meaning through Writing. (2000). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 6(3)

Student perceptions of the teaching-learning nexus

The ability to acquire and the ability to impart are wholly different talents. The former may exist in the most liberal manner without the latter. - Horace Mann (1796-1859) in *On The Art of Teaching* (1840)

If an academic's research enriched their teaching, would their students notice?

Neumann (1994) reports on an Australian study of undergraduate and postgraduate students to determine their views concerning teaching and learning , their contact with university research and whether the conduct of research had any impact on the teaching and learning they experienced.

Students in the study were selected from the disciplines of the humanities, sciences, social sciences and professional areas and from first year to postgraduate levels.

When asked whether a teacher's research role was important or beneficial to teaching, students views included that:

- it demonstrated that the teacher's work had a purpose
- academics were doing something for society rather than churning out degrees
- it placed students on the threshold of opinion and theory
- it enabled students to be in close contact with ideas and showed that knowledge and ideas were not static.

There was a general perception that researchers set different assignments for students than non-researchers. Students asked to perform research activities in their assignments expressed surprise and excitement at the challenge of doing something different from a usual assignment while reporting that the work was stimulating and enjoyable. Those teachers requiring research activities in assignments were perceived as good teachers.

Generally the study found that a majority of the students experienced a relationship between the teaching and research roles of academics and that their perception of this nexus was influenced by the:

- ability and motivation of student
- nature of the discipline
- type of course
- and the opportunity for personal interaction with teachers.

Neuman concludes that active research involvement is a necessary but not sufficient condition for good teaching.

Neumann, R. (1994). *The Teaching-Research Nexus: applying a framework to university students' learning experiences*. European Journal of Education, 29(3), 323-338.

The Teaching-Research Nexus. (1999). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 5(2)

Helping students learn through revision

Revising for exams generally evokes a picture of a student 'swotting' alone at his or her desk into the wee small hours fuelled by coffee and last-minute-cramming adrenalin. It is a lonely, stressful image. Teachers can assist their students to revise more effectively and more comfortably by providing both guidelines for revision outside the classroom and some opportunities for revision inside the classroom. Revision should not be seen as a time-consuming and unnecessary 'add on', but as the consolidation of learning.

While students have access to advice on independent preparation for exams through the University Support Center, it is worthwhile reminding them in class about effective strategies e.g. allowing sufficient time for summarising notes and for identifying patterns, connections and key concepts through the use of mind-maps and other study aids. Alternatively, the class could be asked to generate a list of effective and ineffective study practices, so that students can explore for themselves what is appropriate. Teachers could also provide guidance for revision by stressing which aspects of the course are the most important and indicating the level of detail that students will be expected to demonstrate. Studying in groups outside the classroom, which is often done spontaneously by international students but is not as common a practice for local students, could be suggested as an effective way of addressing areas of individual weakness through the pooling of collective understanding about the course. Time in class might be given to the formation of revision groups.

Methods for revising inside the classroom include mock exams as well as more interactive exam preparation processes that can be integrated with day-to-day classroom activities. For example, groups of students might be asked to generate exam questions, either ones that they would dread or that in their opinion would elicit responses indicating a deep understanding of the course concepts and related content. Groups could then pose their questions to other groups, who would have a set period of time to prepare and present their answer to the whole class. Another exercise might involve assigning areas of the course to small groups of students and asking them to prepare notes on key concepts in these assigned areas for presentation at the next class.

Assisting students to revise will not only help to improve their learning and their grades, but also might help to reduce exam anxiety, which can be debilitating even for very capable students.

Sitting and Surviving Exams. (1997). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 3(8)

Improving student writing

(a search by the University of Manitoba)

There are at least two very frustrating aspects of teaching students to write at the college level. First, many students arrive at university with poor basic writing skills. Second, no matter how much time professors spend marking and correcting student papers, very little improvement appears. The extensive research on teaching writing suggests some potential solutions to these commonly felt frustrations.

Research on student writing:

Research shows interesting similarities and differences between the practices of students and practices of expert writers. Students, for example, are taught a linear writing process: research, thesis statement, outline, writing, revision. Expert writers, on the other hand, tend to follow a more indirect or "recursive" process: research, potential thesis, more research, revised thesis, rough outline, writing, reoutline, research, rewriting, etc. Another major difference between students and experts is that experts are very familiar with the jargon and rhetoric of their special field of writing. Students, on the other hand, often jump between fields and frequently must learn new styles of writing. In their encounters with new rhetorical styles, students try, often unsuccessfully, to imitate the new style without full understanding. This imitative process can result in errors of grammar and organization. And yet, perhaps surprisingly, students are quite adept at correcting grammatical errors. Furthermore, students' errors are similar in kind and number to those appearing in published works.

Why don't students properly edit and revise their academic papers? One significant student difficulty is a poor understanding of the revision process. Revision, to many students, is editing: putting commas in better places, correcting spelling, finding a better (usually bigger) word, etc. Their misconception of "revision" is supported by comments that appear on returned papers correcting everything from grammatical constructions and spelling to the organization of the paper. The feedback, ironically, is often too thorough and overwhelms the students' capacities to analyze and learn from the feedback. This effect occurs even if students receive the feedback on a "rough draft." Numerous studies attest to the ineffectiveness of traditional commenting strategies.

Extracted from Lawall, M. (1998 March). *Improving Student Writing: Recommendations from Research.* University Teaching Services Newsletter. < **http://www.umanitoba.ca:80/UTS/newsletter/1998/march98/newsletter.html**>

'Issues' Elsewhere. (1998). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 4(6)

Assessment for different abilities - an incongruity?

Given the diverse talents among students, should we attempt to structure assessment in order to cater for this diversity? The following quote might help us to answer this question.

What is the purpose of classroom tests?

a To arrive at grades for students
b To assist instructors in planning content presentations
c To facilitate and increase students' learning
d To motivate students to study
e All of the above

The best answers to the above question is (e), but many instructors use tests as though (a) were the correct answer ... Too little emphasis has been placed on using tests to help teachers teach and students learn (Jacobs & Chase, 1992, p.2).

In order to facilitate and motivate student learning through assessment, the set tasks need to make a variety of demands, from those that all students can meet to those that intrigue and challenge even the most able. Is this an ideal to be aimed for, but never really achieved? Attempts that approximate the ideal are needed to serve the different purposes of assessment. A possible option is to provide different sets of questions with a stipulation that the most demanding one needs to be answered by those aiming for higher level grades, while omitting the least demanding set. Perhaps a rule of thumb for assessment could be ensuring that the 'must know, should know, might know' aspects of course are included.

Jacobs, L. and Chase, C. (1992). *Developing and Using Tests Effectively*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Catering for Different Academic Abilities. (1997). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 3(9)

Using student evaluations to improve teaching

(Stanford University suggestions)

Although student evaluations can show instructors what they are doing right and suggest areas for improvement, faculty are frequently not familiar with research on student ratings of teachers that might help them go about making significant changes. They do not always know how to revise their teaching methods when students request, say, more clarity in their lectures, more connection between homework assignments and examinations, or more closure in class discussions. Faculty also indicate that they often do not know how to reconcile contradictory statements found among the written comments, and how to weigh the comments in relation to scaled items.

By all accounts, the best way to use student forms to improve instruction is to consult with a colleague or teaching specialist regarding the meaning of the student data. In particular, faculty members need guidance on how to interpret open-ended comments and use them to make changes so that students learn more.

For suggestions to improve from student written comments, refer to Web site below.

Extracted from *Using Student Evaluations to Improve Teaching.* Speaking of Teaching (1997, Fall), 9(1). **<http://www-ctl.stanford.edu/teach/speakmenu.html>.**

'Issues' Elsewhere. (1998). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 4(6)

Defining responsibility for learning

Who has the responsibility for learning in any student-teacher relationship? How do they know? Is it based on an implicit understanding each has of how such things work, drawn from previous learning experiences? What happens when the responsibility is assumed to belong to the other party?

The use of a learning contract (or agreement) can help to make explicit any implicit understandings of responsibility through a process of negotiation between student and teacher. Paul and Shau (1992) describe this negotiation as "*the notion of active parties to the contract, working in some sort of collaborative relationship but with the responsibility for learning being transferred to some extent to the student*"(p.7).

While the degree of negotiability for the contract and its format may vary according to the student and the situation, a typical learning contract contains four separate sections:

- learning objectives or goals
- strategies and resources available to achieve those objectives
- evidence which will be produced to indicate that the objectives have been achieved
- criteria used to assess this evidence (Anderson, Boud and Sampson, 1996).

The use of a learning contract to define responsibilities can help to clarify the student-teacher relationship initially and, through a process of renegotiation, as situations change.

At the end of the day, contract learning can at least help to ensure that all parties are operating to the same script. The value of the contract as a source of information cannot be overemphasised. (Paul and Shaw,1992, p.10)

Anderson, G., Boud, D., & Sampson, J. (1996). *Learning Contracts: A Practical Guide*. London: Kogan Page Ltd.

Paul, V., & Shaw, M. (1992). A practical guide to introducing contract learning. In S. Brown & D. Baume (Eds.), *Learning contracts: Volume one, A theoretical perspective*. Birmingham, UK: Standing Conference on Educational Development.

Who is Responsible for Learning?. (2000). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 6(6)

Crowd control

'Crowd control' may seem a somewhat inappropriate or unpalatable term to be using in the context of university teaching. It is, however, an issue requiring consideration in a context of greater student numbers, large classes and a learning situation foreign to most if not all new students. Below are a few ideas that have worked for some teachers to ensure large groups of students can learn together effectively:

1 Be sure your preparation for the class is sufficient to warrant the students' commitment.

2 Recognise the shared responsibility, yours and your students', for the effectiveness of the learning environment. Briefly outline this to the students in the first lecture. It is not just your responsibility.

3 Set clear groundrules and without labouring the point outline why adherence is necessary.

4 Be sure to follow your own rules and expect the students to do likewise. Be prepared to express controlled irritation when rules are not being followed. Do this early and you will not need to do it often. Attentive students will appreciate you for this. Unruly students are likely to change their behaviour or leave.

5 Put yourself in their shoes - Is what you are expecting of them reasonable? Is how they are responding to what you are offering reasonable?

6 Get to know at least some of your students. Be able to address them by name. Anonymity mitigates against control. More positively, rapport enables greater understanding of the students' learning needs and an earlier identification of difficulties.

7 Be strategic in dealing with difficult situations arising with students. Avoid direct and public confrontation. Identify 'problem students' and seek explanations and resolutions to difficulties outside of the class.

8 Use the physical space effectively. This may mean walking up the aisles on occasions during the lecture. Physical proximity usually serves to exercise control. It could mean waiting near the back row and walking to the front when it is time for the lecture to start (this gives the students a good cue to quieten down).

9 Don't wait for it to happen. Spend a little time contemplating what difficulties might occur and identifying what strategies you might use to address them. Be aware of department, faculty and University sanctions and procedures.

10 Recognize your legitimate role in the class (particularly new lecturers). The University has faith in you as a teacher. You have been asked to do this job and are being paid to do it. You are seen as having the expertise. Be (or at least appear to be!) confident.

First Class!. (1997). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 3(1)

I think, however, that there isn't any solution to this problem of education other than to realize that the best teaching can be done only when there is a direct individual relationship between a student and a good teacher - a situation in which the student discusses the ideas, thinks about the things, and talks about the things. It's impossible to learn very much by simply sitting in a lecture, or even by simply doing problems that are assigned. - Richard Feynman

Current Themes. (1999). Issues of Teaching and Learning, 5(9)

Martin, K. (2002). *Issues of Teaching and Learning* - Focussing on the student. In *Focusing on the Student.* Proceedings of the 11th Annual Teaching Learning Forum, 5-6 February 2002. Perth: Edith Cowan University. **http://cleo.murdoch.edu.au/confs/tlf/tlf2002/abstracts/martin-abs.html**