

Hand in Hand

Partners in Teaching, Learning, & Assessment Clarion University

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Volume 4, Issue 1

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September-October 2009

Workshop—Sept. 25th. Dorothy Warner, *Information literacy*. 215 Carlson, 2pm.

Faculty author series— Sept. 25th. Kaersten Colvin-Woodruff & Cathie Joslyn. *Art inspired by travel/research*. Level A Carlson, noon.

Faculty author series— Oct. 7th. Vickie Harry. *Researching inquiry-based science initiatives in international schools*. Level A Carlson, noon.

Research brown bag—Oct. 9th. Nell terHorst. *Comedy, tragedy and sacrifice in the films of Fatih Akin*. 243 STC, 12:15pm.

Informal meetings, September 4, 18, Oct. 9, 23. Michelle's at 3:30pm.

Join Partners!

~ Miguel R. Olivás-Luján (Adm. Sc!)

WHAT (OR WHO) is “Partners in Teaching, Learning, and Assessment”? That is a question I took too long to answer after I came to Clarion.

I now know that this group was organized in 1994 to help colleagues improve their teaching and their professional effectiveness without the complications of performance

appraisals, union-management problems, hierarchical and disciplinary boundaries, etc. This group has been supported by Presidential Advancement Awards since 2002, and I am impressed at how well the group works!

It may be the simplicity and looseness of its operation. We meet every other Friday at Michelle's Café, from 3:30 through 5:30pm.

For me, it's a great way to remember that the weekend is about to start, a time to shift gears from the hectic workweek into a pause. While we have one or two items on the menu, we talk about what went well and not so well in the previous weeks. We get and give advice, suggestions, and hints that help us improve our practice. We joke and learn, and we commiserate and celebrate too.

But we also prepare for and collaborate in larger projects. (*cont. p. 2*)



We have a dream

~ MELISSA K. DOWNES (ENGLISH)
JEANNE M. SLATTERY (PSYCHOLOGY)

WE HAVE KNOWN each other for about 7 ½ years and although we have different strengths, fears, disciplines, and students, we share a dream. We dream about students who are eager to talk in class and work together because they have discovered that they can learn from other students. We

dream of students willing to engage in reading and writing and other work outside the classroom, seeing it not as a burden but as part of their learning, even an enjoyable part. We dream of students who recognize that ideas connect across disciplines and courses. We imagine students who know the joy of knowing, of being able to do things and who believe that learning is both cool and fun.

The reality is that many of our students are passive—more so than the 5th graders I briefly taught about computers (JMS). Our students often want order, predictability and fairness, and in all honesty, sometimes we do, too. They seem to believe that being smart and doing well aren't cool. They seem to focus on good grades more than the process of learning.

Then there are the constraints on our teaching: large classes, limited time, physical constraints (chairs that don't move, technology barriers, strangely configured rooms), a student population that is diverse in terms of their abilities and interests. (*cont. on p. 2*)


What is Hand in Hand?

Hand in Hand is a monthly e-newsletter published by Partners in Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Clarion University. *HiH* is dedicated to recognizing good teaching, fostering excellence in teaching, and creating an environment that fosters learning among students and faculty alike. Partners' activities and *HiH* are supported by a Presidential Advancement grant.

We encourage submissions to *HiH* that focus on general rather than discipline-specific issues in teaching, especially articles that are creative, respectful, and recognize the best in all of us. Articles can be on teaching philosophies, technology, pedagogy, or book reviews, but should be no more than 600 words. Articles should be submitted for review in Word to jslattery. More information on submissions can be found at <http://psy1.clarion.edu/HiH/HiHguidelines.pdf>

BECOME A PARTNER! (cont. from p. 1)

We co-sponsor workshops (such as the upcoming one on Information Literacy), we support other units' activities (such as the Research brown bags), and we write pieces for *Hand in Hand*. There is a "Blackboard-based Organization" that serves as a repository of information brought to our attention at some point or another. And once a year, we have a "retreat" to reflect, to learn, to inspire ourselves on how we can do our work better. This year, for example, Emeritus Professor Maryellen Weimer, from Penn State, got us thinking about learner-centered teaching and developing engaged classrooms.

Ready to learn more? Check out the previous issues of *Hand in Hand* <<http://www.clarion.edu/91885/>>. Join and explore the Blackboard Partners organization (email jslattery if you want to be added to it). But most importantly, have a cup of coffee or an ice cream at Michelle's and join the conversation. I think that you—and your students—will be glad that you became a Partner! 

WE HAVE A DREAM (cont. from p. 1)

Each of these seems to interfere with our ability to take steps towards our dream.


Sometimes we are afraid of what will happen if we loosen our control over the classroom. How do we trust our students? Can we trust ourselves? Can we give up some control in order to better meet our overarching teaching goals? Can we cover the necessary content? How will our department chairs, deans and evaluating committees respond if we change our teaching style?

From Maryellen Weimer we learned we can create more active, democratic and learner-centered classrooms, classrooms that are our dream made real. In her workshop, she argued that we can transform the teaching process

by focusing on *learning* more than teaching. Although she presented an overall philosophy of how to do this, even smaller shifts in approaching students and classroom dynamics can make a significant difference.

All of us can take small steps toward a more learner-centered teaching style.

We can ask our students what they want to discuss and focus on. We can give them choices in the types of assignments they do. We can give them some decision-making and negotiation power in the syllabus and its policies. We can ask for feedback and evaluation during the term, in addition to formal student evaluations, and seriously respond to their concerns. We can help them think about why we make the class decisions we've made—and become more reflexive about these decisions ourselves. We can acknowledge the power dynamic associated with teaching and allow some wiggle room by listening to students, learning from them, and being willing to shift our teaching strategies, policies, and focus to match their needs and interests.

Even if we aren't ready to take the big steps, all of us can take small steps toward a more learner-centered teaching style. We can look students in the eye, learn our students' names, know our students as people. Our work—and our students'—can make our dreams real. 

Thoughts on learner-centered teaching

~PATRICIA KOLENICK (EDUCATION)

BECAUSE I AM always interested in improving my teaching, I was eager to attend Partner's August retreat featuring Maryellen Weimer's discussion of Learner-Centered Teaching. Weimer described how the focus of educational theories has

changed from what professors do to what students learn over the last 20 years. She also described what we can do to further extend these ideas and put them into practice.

Although significant changes have occurred, Weimer argued that there is much still to do. In this workshop and her book, *Learning-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice* (2002), she argued that student actions and their learning processes, not professors' teaching strategies, should be the focus of research and practice of teaching. She concluded that learning is a uniquely idiosyncratic endeavor controlled not by professors, but by students. She argued that students need to become actively involved in the learning process and become more independent learners.

As I listened to Weimer, I considered what images are evoked by the words "school" and "classroom." For me, these include listening to faculty and taking notes, taking objective tests, raising one's hand before answering professor-generated questions of recall and regurgitation of facts, and lugging textbooks to class. These are the very images, languid practices, and outdated expectations upon which schooling has been structured since the first common schools were

Caring is crucial


People learn best when they ask an important question that they care about answering, or adopt a goal that they want to reach. If they don't care, they will not try to reconcile, explain, modify, or integrate new knowledge with old. They will not try to construct new models of reality. They may remember information for a short period (long enough to take the test), but only when their memory generates questions will it be prepared to change knowledge structures. Only then does it know where to place something. If we are not seeking an answer to anything, we pay little attention to random information. (p. 31)

Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

erected over a century ago. These are images of teacher-centered practices, not learner-centered teaching. A new set of images, reflective of a change in practice is needed—images portraying students as thinkers, creators, and constructors of knowledge. Classrooms can become places where students develop hypotheses, test out their own and others’ ideas, make connections among content areas, explore personally-relevant issues and problems, work cooperatively with peers, and become lifelong learners.

Students [can become] thinkers, creators, and constructors of knowledge.

During the workshop, Weimer argued that changes in five important teaching practices must take place to make classrooms more learner-centered: 1) the balance of power must be shifted from faculty to students; 2) the content must change from something only to be mastered to a tool for developing learning skills; 3) the paradigm must change from one where faculty do all the planning and perform good pedagogy to one where faculty are guides and facilitators; 4) the responsibility for learning must shift from faculty to students, with the aim of helping students become more autonomous learners, and 5) evaluation must be used to provide feedback and to generate learning, with strong emphasis on student participation in self-evaluation.

My goals as a professor include creating challenging, engaging, and authentic educational experiences that, coupled with reflective practice, evoke student learning and create lifelong learners. Weimer reaffirmed my convictions regarding both teaching and learning. 

References


Weimer, M. (2002). *Learning-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

First week changes

~ Suzanne Boyden (Biology)

AFTER ATTENDING our retreat on Learner-Centered Teaching, a number of faculty incorporated new strategies and approaches into their initial class meetings. Many of these were designed to shift the balance of power in the classroom, providing the students a voice in the design of the course and creating a climate of participation from the outset. These are some of the results we shared with one another via email:

- Marité Haynes asked her students to make the participation rules. They eliminated cold-calling and enforced hand-raising in order to avoid monopolies on conversations. Here are her impressions: “On the second day they participated on their own initiative and blurting out answers was curtailed. I previously had the ability to make these rules but the students gave me the power!”
- Jeanne Slattery engaged her class in a conversation about grading student papers and helping students take responsibility for their work (as they want to do with their future counseling clients). They decided to begin doing self-assessments of their papers and believe that this will strengthen their papers.
- Shannon Nix also asked her students to set up guidelines for class participation. They developed a strategy where they assess their own participation (quantity and quality) on a +/- scale on the way out of class each day, as well as evaluate the participation level of their lab partners after each lab. So far their assessments and Dr. Nix's match, and students appear motivated to interact and raise their scores.
- To get students thinking about the role they play in creating a positive learning environment, Suzie Boyden used the first day to brainstorm lists of qualities that make a course “good” or “bad.” The instructor

and students then agreed to take responsibility for changing those things that were reasonable and within their power. “It was refreshing and eye-opening for all of us.” 

Learner-centered teaching and Blackboard

~ Marilyn Harhai (Library Science)

ONE OF THE principles central to learner-centered teaching is that faculty do more to get students learning from and with each other (collaboration). The course management system at Clarion, Blackboard, offers several tools that make collaborative work possible and painless for faculty to facilitate.

Advanced Group Management— This tool is designed to make forming groups a breeze. It can be used to set-up groups, and then it can be used to easily assign students to the groups.

Wimba Classroom—This is a virtual classroom environment in which students can share audio and visual materials. The tool can be used by the instructor for office hours or delivering lectures but it can also be a powerful tool for student collaboration. Wimba classrooms can be set up for groups of students to interact in real time on assignments. Students can also use it to record presentations for the class to view at a later time.

Wikis—Wikis are simply web pages that multiple people can edit. Students can collaborate as an entire class or in groups on designing and creating a web page.

Blog—The Blog tool can be used in a myriad of ways for student collaboration. Standard uses of a blog include journaling with students and providing commentary on each other's work.

Discussion boards—Using discussion boards as an online teaching technique is a much-used

method that can be used effectively for learner-centered teaching. The discussion board can be used for group work involving case studies and collaborative problem solving. Other ideas for discussion boards include role-playing, holding a debate, guest lectures, virtual field trips and sharing research.

These are just a few of the tools within Blackboard that can be used to facilitate learner-centered teaching.

While some ideas were given, the tools can all be used in many more ways. Faculty assistance on these tools is available from the Learning Technology Center (ext. 1848) located in 104 Becht Hall. [QR](#)

Financial counseling: Part of advising?

~ Robin Lenox (Acad. Enrichment)

IN TODAY'S ECONOMY, retirements are disintegrating and employees will be working longer. The housing market is collapsing; companies are downsizing and even closing. The news is announcing new company layoffs daily. Should we re-evaluate our role as advisors to include financial advising—both for the present and our students' futures? I believe if our goal is to help students become responsible, independent adults, we owe it to them to bring financial considerations to their attention.

There are a number of ways in which I already incorporate financial awareness into my individual advising sessions and work with student groups. Our TRIO Student Support Services newsletter is one vehicle I use to get the word out. I've written on web sites on which to buy textbooks inexpensively, current trends in careers, and the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For. I recently wrote an article entitled, "Understand Your Debt Load," challenging students to estimate their current debt and to consider monetary decisions that will impact their post-college

plans. The newsletter also has the advantage of reaching parents, because it is mailed to students' home addresses.

The six-week Freshman Seminar course provided by Student Support Services is also a useful venue for educating students about financial issues, including the consequences of only paying the minimum on a credit card each month. During one of our sessions this past fall, I asked, "How would you invest \$60,000?" (the approximate cost of their education at Clarion). I asked them to consider what kind of return they expected and we discussed the art of investing in themselves. Several students were engaged and surprised to see the importance of finances in their not so distant future. It will be interesting to see how students respond to similar sessions in the future, given the recent drastic economic changes.

The bulletin board in our hallway also proves to be useful in getting information out. Not only do my own students look at the bulletin boards while waiting for appointments, students walking by benefit from the information as well.

Students' financial health *can* impact their academic and career success.

Recently I've begun to coach undecided students to investigate entry-level salaries in their potential career fields and compare them to their lifestyle expectations after graduation. I have also contacted a major bank and plan to use their "Guide to Managing Your Finances and Credit Responsibly" during my individual meetings with students. While these ideas are easy to integrate non-intrusively, I have questions about more specific financial matters, which I encourage you to consider:

- Should we advise students to live frugally rather than taking advantage of college opportunities like the new "hotel-like" accommodations?
- Should we educate students about FICA scores and ways of protecting them?
- What can students do to make graduate school a realistic option?
- Should we advise our students to investigate entry-level career salaries as they apply for student loans?
- With employers checking credit reports and Facebook, do we have an obligation to educate students about how their credit history/score affects hiring decisions?
- When students graduate with a poor credit history, a past-due car loan or the maximum in student loans, can we still consider them successful?
- Should we advise students to make a budget for post-graduation so they can fully comprehend their debt load? If they are burdened with car payments, credit card debt and student loans, moving to a new location may not be an option. They may be forced to move back home until they are more financially stable.

I have more questions than answers. As a counselor, one of my major goals is to help students become responsible adults. Although the role of an academic counselor does not traditionally include financial counseling, students' financial health *can* impact their academic and career success in today's world. In light of our country's economic woes, students should be aware of these issues and how they will be affected both now and in the future. [QR](#)

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