

**F**ACULTY **F**OCUS

# Special Report

## Teaching Mistakes from the College Classroom

March 2010

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# Teaching Mistakes from the College Classroom

Think back to your first few years of teaching. If you're like most educators, you probably made your share of mistakes. To be sure, we all do things differently now than we did when we were first starting out. Thank goodness for that!

When *Faculty Focus* put out a call for articles for this special report on teaching mistakes, we really didn't know what to expect. Would faculty be willing to share their earlier missteps for all to see? Would the articles all talk about the same common mistakes, or would the range of mistakes discussed truly reflect the complexities of teaching today?

We were delighted at the response, not only in terms of the number of instructors willing to share their stories with our readers, but by the variety of mistakes in the reflective essays. For example, in "You Like Me, You Really Like Me. When Kindness Becomes a Weakness," Jolene Cunningham writes of her discovery that doing everything you can for your students is not always the best policy.

In "If I Tell Them, They Will Learn," Nancy Doiron-Maillet writes about her realization that it's not enough to provide information to students if they don't have opportunities to then apply what you are trying to teach them.

Other articles in *Teaching Mistakes from the College Classroom* include:

- When Expectations Collide
- Things My First Unhappy Student Taught Me
- Understanding My Role as Facilitator
- Don't Assume a Student's Previous Knowledge
- What Works in One Culture May Not Work in Another

We thank all the authors who shared their stories and know that the lessons learned will help prevent others from making these same mistakes.

Mary Bart  
Editor  
*Faculty Focus*

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# Table of Contents

The Things I Did Badly: Looking Back on My First Five Years of Teaching .....	4
You Like Me, You Really Like Me. When Kindness Becomes a Weakness .....	5
Establishing Credibility with Students: It Doesn't Happen Automatically .....	6
Don't Assume a Student's Previous Knowledge .....	7
When Expectations Collide.....	8
If I Tell Them, They Will Learn .....	10
Things My First Unhappy Student Taught Me .....	11
Neglecting to Cultivate a Research-Based Teaching Practice .....	12
Understanding My Role as Facilitator .....	12
What Works in One Culture May Not Work in Another .....	14
Becoming Aware of the Instructional Value of Student Writing Samples .....	15
Assumptions I Made in the Past and How I Come to Know My Students Now.....	16
On a Frustrating Day or in a Troubled Class, Remember We All Make a Difference .....	17
Disaster at the Casino: Betting on Subject Matter Expertise to Win Over Adult Students.....	18
Teaching Mistakes: Four Lessons for Beginning Instructors .....	20

# The Things I Did Badly: Looking Back on My First Five Years of Teaching

By Graham Broad, PhD.

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Like birthdays, anniversaries are occasions for reflection, and as I approach the fifth anniversary of my teaching career, I find that my thoughts are drawn to the things that I did badly. Here's a list of five teaching mistakes I have made. I share them in the hope that they will cause others to reflect, and perhaps will help new professors avoid making these same mistakes.

**Not taking advantage of research on pedagogy.** It's curious: as a graduate student in history, I was trained to maintain the highest evidentiary standards in my scholarship, to situate my research in a body of existing literature, and to scrutinize every claim I made for any possible error. And yet, when it came to teaching, I went entirely on instinct, teaching the way I was taught, assuming that was good enough. It wasn't. Nearly a year passed before it occurred to me that there might be scholars in the field of pedagogy, too, and that maybe they'd written useful material about how to teach! Was I in for a surprise. Keeping up with that field is a major scholarly undertaking. So I limit myself to two journals specific to teaching in my field, and over the years, I've attended workshops and compiled a modest collection of books on teaching. I'm glad to say that my instincts weren't entirely off, but I also know that I'm a much better professor now for having learned from the pedagogical literature.

**Chastising the whole class.** We all get exasperated at times, and the temptation to let a whole class have it is sometimes hard to resist. In my third year as a professor, though, I had a "eureka" moment in the midst of bawling out a class for its poor attendance. It suddenly occurred to me, "I'm talking to the people who are here." I was making them resentful—and doing nothing to reach the people who were the source of the problem. Ever since then, I've dealt with problems on a one-on-one basis, except in cases where nearly everyone is doing something wrong.

**Being defensive about student complaints.** Yes, there is something presumptuous about undergraduates, who often are still teenagers, griping about their professors. Have they

taught? Studied pedagogy? Don't they realize how good they have it? More and more, however, I remind myself that, since I'm training them to critically assess every reading and, indeed, every truth claim placed before them, I can hardly object when students turn those very faculties of critical inquiry on me. Instead, I've moved toward greater transparency in my teaching methods. I also took the advice in Gerald Graff's book *Clueless in Academe* and made my own pedagogy part of the discussion.

**Answering student e-mail at all hours.** I'm considered a student-friendly professor, one who is always willing to lend a hand. Last year, however, I inserted a passage in my course outlines stating that I would answer student e-mail during regular business hours only: Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. I think one of the damaging ideas conveyed by various inspirational books and movies about teachers who make a difference is that teachers are not entitled to private lives, that they must be on call for their students at all times. If the purpose of education is, as the ancients believed, to help us lead "the good life," what kind of example am I setting if I live entirely to serve my students? A corollary: I no longer answer e-mails that ask me questions that students can answer for themselves using the course outline and other resources (e.g., "What is the final exam worth?"). Some students complain that I'm slow to respond to e-mail, but I remind them in a good-natured way that students somehow muddled by for thousands of years without e-mail at all.

**Egotism.** At some point in the past year, I decided that my initial beliefs that I could reach all students and that all teaching problems could be resolved through correct pedagogy weren't optimism, but rather egotism. Some students, I have come to understand, just aren't that into me. I give all students the same benefit of my time and experience, and I tell those who are slipping that they can stand upright. But I realize that some of them choose not to, so I have decided to respect that choice, even if I believe that it's the wrong one.

Above all, I have come to realize that the division between teacher and scholar is an artificial one. Over the past five years, my teaching has improved by leaps and bounds whenever I have applied the same standards of critical scrutiny to my pedagogy that I have always applied to my research. I can only assume that, in another five years, I'll be shaking my head at some of the methods I'm employing now.

*Graham Broad, PhD., is an assistant professor in the Department of History at King's University College, University of Western Ontario. ●*

# You Like Me, You Really Like Me. When Kindness Becomes a Weakness

By Jolene Cunningham

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I remember walking into my classroom for the first time as a new instructor. It was like Christmas. Anything was possible. Everything was new. The air was crisp with anticipation of things to come. To say I was wide-eyed and a bit naïve would be on the mark. I stepped into the room knowing that I was going to be a great teacher. My students would love me. I would open their minds to great revelations of knowledge and I was not going to make the mistakes I had witnessed from the professors in my past. I was going to actually care about my students. I would have empathy. I would gain the respect of my students through loyalty and trust because they would be able to sense my compassion for the student and my passion for knowledge.

Uh, huh! My students loved me alright. They saw me as an easy mark. Because I saw it as a personal failure in my own ability if my students were not all making A's, I was willing to give make-up exams and extra credit assignments. I would grade on a curve if I thought too many students missed a question on an exam. It was driving me crazy. What was I doing wrong?

I was beginning to second guess myself at every turn. I was constantly rechecking my lesson plans and I researched other methods of presenting the material. It seemed that no matter what I did my students still weren't meeting my expectations. The thought that perhaps I was not cut out for this job began to creep in. I didn't want to be an obstacle in the education of these students. My only goal was for my students to succeed.

One day my supervisor called me into his office for a talk. He asked how my first semester of teaching was going. I didn't want to admit defeat. I told him I thought I needed to offer a tutoring session at night to help my students on a more individual level. He looked at me and smiled. He told me that he commended me for my diligence and dedication to my students, but I needed to remember one very important thing...I wasn't working with a class full of rocket scientists and not every student

was going to work hard to get that A, no matter how much I bent over backwards for them.

I left his office even more determined to prove him wrong. He has grown callous during his years of teaching I was sure. I continued to go out of my way to accommodate my students, then one morning I walked around the corner in time to overhear a conversation between two of my students. One young man asked his friend, "Did you study for the test we have this morning?" His friend responded, "No, but if I don't do well, I'll just give her a sob story. She will let me take it over." It was then that I knew my students had mistaken my kindness for weakness. My supervisor's words rang in my head. I knew things had to change.

My second semester was very different. Many of the students I had the previous semester decided to take another class with me – no doubt looking for another easy grade. It was a rude awakening for us all. On the first day of the semester, I gave each student my new and improved syllabus. There were several changes from the syllabus I had used the previous semester. I no longer accepted late assignments for any reason, as I had a schedule of assignment due dates to accompany my syllabus. I felt this gave everyone ample notice of assignments and work should be completed in a timely manner. I gave no extra credit, no curve on the test grades, and make-up tests were given only with a documented excuse. At that time, I went over the syllabus and my expectations for the students and what I would like to achieve in the course in detail. I wanted to address any questions up front.

Several of my previous students were less than thrilled with the changes. One even tried to "sweet talk" me into going back to the standards of the previous semester. He told me, "I thought you were such a cool teacher, but you are turning out to be just like all the rest." It was then that I gave my students some advice. I said, "You will only get out of this class what you put into it. I am a coach. My job is to teach you how to develop a skill set by using the concepts that you learn. It doesn't matter how much I want you to succeed, YOU must want it for yourselves." I could hear the crickets chirping when I finished my speech...no comments to be had.

The semester began and it was difficult at first. There was a bit of whining and gnashing of teeth the first week or two. However, to my surprise my students did better. I started asking them to complete problems during class discussions on the board as part of their class participation grade. They began to work harder, because no one knew who was going to be called on the put the homework

PAGE 6 ▶

problems on the board for the class. Therefore they were now completing their homework assignments. I continued to offer tutoring sessions to those who requested help individually. Higher test scores were appearing with each chapter we completed. I may not have been the most popular instructor, but I had control of my classroom. Finally, I found that the students who sought personal tutoring were the hardest working. They cared about succeeding and I developed a wonderful rapport with those students.

I have been teaching for several years now. Even now I have students from those initial semesters contacting me on occasion. They tell me what a wonderful instructor I had been because I cared.

I know now that caring is important in becoming a good instructor. I also realize that discipline is vital in the classroom as well, even when working with older students. I had to learn to balance compassion with discipline. Balance was the key. Here are a few ways to assist you in achieving balance in your classroom:

1. Be realistic in your expectations — of your students, yourself, and the course outcome.
2. Remain teachable—you will benefit greatly if you are open to new ideas and methods and so will your students.
3. Don't accept guilt—it's the gift that keeps on giving and students use it well.
4. Give yourself permission to say no, no matter how sad the story.
5. Trust your instincts—if you feel like you're being led down the primrose path you probably are.
6. Don't forget **YOU ARE IN CHARGE!!**

Teaching is one of the most rewarding and challenging experiences you will ever have. Some of the most valuable resources we can give our students are our time, our expertise, our patience, and the gift of acquiring knowledge. Don't be afraid to rise to the challenge.

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# Establishing Credibility with Students: It Doesn't Happen Automatically

By *Kristen Jensen Wall*

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**A**s an educator of adult students, I know that you don't have credibility with your class just because you are the one that's standing in front.

Furthermore, your credibility is not only determined by your academic pedigree, but also by the level of respect you show your students. I know this, and yet it didn't really sink in until I taught one of my first classes of graduate education students in my school's evening and weekend program. I got up front, gave a brief introduction of myself, and then moved on to the first topic. The evening proceeded just how I had planned it. The students seemed engaged, even enthusiastic, to participate in the group discussions and the mock lessons I had devised.

The first inkling I had that all was not as it seemed was during our second weekend of class. A student approached me with questions about the practicum, the final project for their program, and I referred her to the program director. I was new to the program, I said, and I didn't want to lead her astray. She looked startled and asked how many classes I'd taught. When I answered, "Two", she seemed disappointed. I couldn't do anything about the number of classes I'd taught, but looking back on the situation I could have done more to reassure her that she was in good hands.

A few weeks after the class was over I got the course evaluation results and was shocked to learn that a few of my students enjoyed the class but didn't feel that what they had learned was applicable to their own teaching practice. One student mentioned that he never understood what my credentials were, and why I was the person leading the class. Some of the other comments sent a clear message that I hadn't shown them respect by acknowledging the skills they already had.

The feedback stung but I knew that they were right. I had been so concerned with the course design and meeting the course objectives that I forgot to ask the students what

PAGE 7 ►

they wanted to learn. I forgot to ask them how they wanted to improve their teaching skills. I forgot to tell them who I was, what I brought to the table, and how I could help. Merriam and Caffarella state, “First, appreciating and taking into consideration the prior knowledge and experience of learners has become a basic assumption of our practice as educators of adults, wherever this knowledge was learned” (1999, p. 25). I had forgotten a basic assumption!

I’m scheduled to teach the class again later this spring, so I am now revising my approach. I want to integrate the many years of teaching experience that my students already have into the course design so that the students can see that they are surrounded by resources. I will better explain who I am and why I am qualified to teach education classes. I will ask them what concerns they have when they teach and then create opportunities for them to explore solutions. It is one thing to say that you acknowledge the skills and experiences of your adult students and quite another to demonstrate it.

Merriam, S. and Caffarella, R. (1999). *Learning in adulthood*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers. ●

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## Don’t Assume a Student’s Previous Knowledge

By Donald G. Schoffstall

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A major assumption I made as a beginning teacher was assuming that my adult students were coming into my classroom with previously acquired sets of knowledge and skills, both at our school and from previous employment or their secondary school settings. It led to issues such as miscommunication in lecture or on assignments, poor grades on formal assessments, and lower student motivation and morale.

I have since addressed that problem by having each of my students complete a specific needs assessment sheet on the first day of class so that I can be better informed of any issues that may arise and have an understanding of my in-

dividual student’s skill levels.

### Getting to know your students

Students arrive in your classroom from all different places; some are only coming from down the hallway while others are coming from high school or even their now-former careers of the past decade. Granted each of these students will bring a variety of knowledge and experiences with them as they enter the door and take a seat at a new desk. However, each student poses a challenge for all of us as instructors. On the first day, the environment we create and impression we make will influence that student far beyond those initial moments. This becomes our time to interact, influence, empower, and understand our students; each one of them all at the same time.

When I first started teaching back in July 2007, I wanted to learn as much about my culinary students as they wanted to know about me. I wanted to hear about their experiences, knowledge, and skills. I had hoped to utilize what I learned and build it them in my classes. Yet early on this became a challenge, a stumbling block that would prove to be an issue for me, especially through my first few terms.

It was easy to assume, or so I thought, that the recent high school graduate had training in computers and could easily write a paper or solve basic math problems; the student with some work experience should understand basic sanitation standards or know how to read a recipe; and that the career switcher would have a variety of previously mastered skills in which to build on. Wrong!

What I soon found out is that these assumptions lead to a variety of issues within the classroom, including miscommunication during lecture and on assignments, poor assessment grades, and overall lower student satisfaction and morale. Wow, this was not what I wanted for my students! I wanted to make a positive difference, not be another issue or hurdle for them. I began to realize I needed to take a step back and observe my students before making any assumptions about their individual abilities. Sure, many of them probably fit those early assumptions, but what about the ones that didn’t?

This is something I wanted to correct right away. So, I removed my assumptions, started with a clean slate, and reworked my process of getting to know my students. I sought help from my boss at the time and was able to develop a basic needs assessment sheet that I have worked into and adjusted for every class that I teach. The goals of this assessment is to learn about the student, what do they know about this subject, what do they hope to learn, and

PAGE 8 ►

how do they think they will use this material in their career. It also gives them an opportunity to tell me anything about themselves they would like me to know.

The answers they provide help me understand their current knowledge of the subject matter and allow me to address that common student concern: particularly regarding the future application(s) of the material. I can then adjust lectures and assignments throughout my course that can expand upon their answers or concerns. From the last section of the assessment I have received everything from the funny “just teach man” to the more serious “I am uncomfortable with computers” or “I need additional help on tests or with note-taking.” Perfect, now I have the opportunity to make that positive difference!

Additionally, I allow my students time to introduce themselves to me and the class and I now take much less time introducing myself at the beginning. I always tell them I will work my experiences in to my delivery throughout the course, but they can always ask questions as well.

Putting yourself in their shoes

Another adjustment I implemented was having all my projects and in-class assignments read by a third-party and not a coworker. Though I usually have them read them by a co-worker as well for subject content, I pick someone that I know is not familiar with what I am teaching to ensure I have not left out key information or a vital step in directions. By doing this I have drastically cut down on questions and confusion as to what is required for these assignments. (Thanks, Mom.)

As teachers we will all make mistakes, but we must be willing to change and learn from those mistakes just as we implore our students to do. It is hard not to make assumptions on what our students should know, especially the ones that have been in our schools for a while, but maybe they missed that piece of information in a previous class or have always struggled with that particular skill. It is our opportunity to help; and not shut them out or accidentally turn off their willingness to try learning the skill one more time.

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# When Expectations Collide

By Susan C. Eliason

“Virtually all conflict results from incongruent expectations.”

So affirmed William G. Dyer, one of my most memorable professors from my B-school days. It is a maxim I applied early in my career, especially when I began teaching part time in the department from which I completed my own graduate work. My syllabi and orientation lectures were pristine and void of ambiguity about my expectations of students. I communicated clearly and students got it: We’re replicating a professional environment in class, and we work smart. We can enjoy ourselves within a context of respect and productive learning. Teacher makes the rules.

We understood each other, and everything went well.

Until it didn’t.

Summer seven years ago was without doubt the worst of my life. I had agreed three months earlier to fill in for a faculty member who “owned” a critical course but who was unable during that eight-week term to teach the 45 supremely confident students-cum-investment banker-wanna-be’s who had earned acceptance to our prestigious business school. I was largely unfamiliar with this course and soon learned it was quite unlike the others I had taught.

On Day One, I stepped into the large classroom and introduced the course, including a statement of my expectations as clearly identified in my well-written syllabus. To my surprise, the orientation was met with hostility and resistance nigh unto mutiny. The glares, crossed arms, and other behavioral cues were easy enough to interpret, but I was completely unprepared for the verbal opposition that spewed from the tiered seats in front of me.

We don’t like this text, and here’s our signed petition to use Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* instead. We don’t like the idea of rearranging our established cohort teams for this class. We don’t like your attendance policy;

PAGE 9 ►



## FROM PAGE 8

we want to come and go during class without penalty. And we don't like the rule about no eating or drinking, except during breaks; we want to chug from our Big Gulps with our feet up whenever we feel like it. 'Cause we're special. We've been admitted to the business program, and we're entitled. Besides, this isn't how the course is supposed to be.

"Supposed to be" were key words and, as it turned out, the crux of the problem. This overview course had acquired a feel-good/low-stress reputation during the 20-plus years it had been taught via lecture and weekly activity. Students had attended class more or less as desired, and the readings consisted mostly of photocopied articles. This summer term, however, I had relegated such articles to the collection of supplementary readings identified on my syllabus. (Covey's *Seven Habits* and about 15 additional books also appeared on that list.) Agreed, the text I had been encouraged to select was monstrous and formidable, but I had considered my audience when making that choice: I'd be dealing with wunderkinds.

I had expected to challenge those wunderkinds, to give them their money's worth. They, on the other hand, were expecting a cakewalk. During summer, no less, when the living was easy and a general flip-flop style was supposedly *de rigueur*, both literally and figuratively.

I hasten to point out that the vocal minority generated the noisiest complaints. But even many of the reserved and acquiescent students found ways to convey their displeasure and indicate that unspoken expectations had been violated.

Things got even worse. I discovered, for example, that plans by the department to redesign the course were soon to be underway. This summer term was essentially an ill-defined no man's land and placeholder between the long-held traditional approach and a new-and-improved version yet to be determined. The transitory period, along with spotty faculty presence during prime vacation season, resulted in virtually no support from the department. (One faculty member had offered a well-intentioned suggestion back in April that, as an experiment, I require the aforementioned tome as the primary text. Not a good idea under the circumstances, I later mused.)

Further, just days before class began, a graduate-student teaching assistant had been assigned by the department to work with my section. He was a bright fellow, and I had high hopes for a successful collaboration. Then I learned "Horace" was serving under some duress, having been persuaded at the last moment to lend a hand for a few hours a week and then to return speedily after class to the

more stimulating rigors of research with his senior faculty mentor. I knew I was in trouble when Horace announced that he couldn't be bothered with stops at the copy center; his time was too valuable. Nor was he interested in crunching numbers or dealing with any of those other tedious details associated with scoring student work. And he argued incessantly that my quizzes needed to be harder. Horace required far more heavy lifting than if had I faced my challenges alone. I should have released him back into the wild long before the term ended.

All in all, it was the perfect storm. Had I been inclined to deface public property, my graffiti that summer might have included such petulant sputterings as:

*UNFAIR!  
STUDENTS RAISED BY WOLVES  
DEPARTMENT: CLUELESS AND CRUEL  
IS ANYONE OUT THERE?  
CONGRUENT EXPECTATIONS BE HANGED  
I WILL NOT QUIT. I WILL NOT. I*

My serenity largely restored in the intervening years, I have analyzed the factors that converged with such breathtaking and disastrous precision on that summer term. I concluded that simple two-party agreements alone do not always a deal make. Accordingly, I have developed this corollary to my original interpretation of Dyer's fundamental principle and applied it to subsequent teaching experiences:

"Expectations must be clarified and managed not only between persons, but also among entities in the larger environment. Organizational dynamics and historical contexts, as well as relevant human stakeholders, must align or otherwise factor intelligently into the equation, in order for us to have a hope of producing successful outcomes."

My wise maternal grandmother said it more simply: "We all need to use our heads."

*Susan C. Eliason is a teaching and learning consultant at Brigham Young University and a part-time faculty member at the Marriott School of Management (BYU). ●*

# If I Tell Them, They Will Learn

By Nancy Doiron-Maillet, RN MN

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Eighteen years ago, I began as a new teacher in the bachelor of nursing program. Preparing lectures seemed easy – I simply tried to cram everything I knew about the topic into a lesson and then impart all my wisdom upon my students within the 50 minute, 1.5 hour or three-hour classes that I taught. I was convinced that whatever I had to tell my students they would incorporate into their learning. “Tell them and they will learn.” However, time after time while working with students in clinical practice, I found myself saying “but I just covered that is class!”

I have learned a lot about teaching and learning during the past 18 years, but I believe the most valuable lesson has been the realization that students need to engage with the content in order to truly enhance their understanding. “Telling” students information does not translate to learning. Opportunities to apply what they are learning are very significant in this process of building knowledge. I continue to lecture, but do so in much more confined periods of time. As a teacher, I think it is my responsibility to help students understand complex issues, to break the more difficult ideas down into smaller, more palatable parts, and then give students a chance to chew on the information. Application is such a key component to learning, particularly in our profession of nursing (but true in many disciplines, I would think).

## Importance of student engagement

So, what does “engage with the content” really mean? It begins with an understanding that students are not open funnels waiting for the information to be poured in. Students need to actively involve themselves with the material that is being introduced in the classroom. In doing so, I believe that they take greater responsibility for their own learning, increasing their motivation to learn and actually finding meaning in what they are learning.

We can help students engage or interact with the content in various ways. Having students come to class with a beginning understanding of the material is essential. Students have a responsibility to prepare for class. I fully believe that if teachers assign a reasonable amount of class preparation, then class time can be used much more effec-

tively. An important point here, however, is “reasonable” preparation. All too often, teachers assign an astronomical amount of reading as preparation for class. If students perceive that the amount of reading or preparation is unreasonable or overwhelming, then they simply will not do it. Some may say, “that is their choice”, which is true; however, if we believe in our role as teachers to facilitate students’ learning, then helping them come to class prepared is very beneficial.

Class preparation can be any number of activities. One activity that I have found particularly helpful in facilitating students’ engagement with the content is the “muddy water” question. I frequently assign readings from the student’s textbook and then ask them to write two or three questions that they continue to struggle with related to what they have just read – ‘what about the content remains unclear or muddy?’ At the beginning of class, students hand in these questions for me to look over while they are working through a short activity. Inevitably, many of their questions will be covered in what I have already planned for the class, but there are always some areas that I had not planned on addressing. What is really important to the success of this activity is that I allow time to address their questions. If I do not follow through with this level of accountability, then the exercise is meaningless.

## Interactive learning activities

There are a number of interactive activities online that I have found to be particularly beneficial. Wisconsin Online Repository for Teaching and Learning ([www.wisc-online.com](http://www.wisc-online.com)) is an excellent resource for online animation activities. The activities found on this website are very interactive and really foster students’ engagement with the content. I assign activities from this website on a regular basis as it allows students opportunities to work with the content in a fun and interactive manner. Some students complete these interactive learning activities prior to coming to class; some students work with the activities after class; and some choose not to do them at all. It is their choice.

I have learned to appreciate the benefits of using games in my class. In particular, I find a crossword puzzle a great way to engage students with the content. I originally thought that this would take up too much of “my” time to lecture, but have since realized that I cover just as much, and sometimes more, by having the students actually ‘play’ with the content in a game or a puzzle.

In addition, Jeopardy templates are available online and provide teachers with another fun and effective vehicle to

PAGE 11 ►

cover a number of topical categories. I have developed a Jeopardy game to leave on my Blackboard component of a pharmacology course and students can play it at their leisure.

Students need opportunities to apply what they are learning while they are learning. Throughout class, I often have an application question or exercise for students to demonstrate their understanding. In nursing, providing students with ‘real’ patient situations to apply concepts discussed in class help to make it more meaningful. Use of Wordles, or word clouds, is a great way to summarize important points about complex concepts. If you have not used a Wordle yet, give it a try at [www.wordles.net](http://www.wordles.net) – you will be surprised at the effectiveness of this little visual aid.

Even after 18 years, there is no doubt that lessons about teaching and learning occur each and every time I step into the classroom. Being committed to this level of on-going growth is essential to my continued development as a teacher. It takes work, but it’s also energizing. Facilitating students’ ability to engage with the content is a valuable way to expend that energy.

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## Things My First Unhappy Student Taught Me

*By Sherran Deems*

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**M**y first year as an instructor was also my first grade appeal. As a beginning professor I thought I had covered everything clearly, was appropriately encouraging, and worked hard to meet the individual needs of my students.

As a graduate student I had taught painting and drawing to art majors but this was my first experience teaching non-arts majors. What a world of difference between the students. I thought I was doing the right thing by pointing out the strengths of the student’s painting along with the

areas for improvement. The student, however, only heard the “good” information and did not perceive the negative as having any impact on her grade. This was in sharp contrast to the two classes of art students I taught who heard the negative and had to be reminded of the positive.

In my initial conference with the student concerning her grade I discovered that the course had been taken for an easy A. The student operated under the idea that anyone could make art and that there were no clear criteria for determining good versus bad art. I had relied on several very short lectures and a couple of demonstrations, in addition to stating the minimum criteria for passing the course. What I had not anticipated was the student’s need for something much more readily quantifiable and more defined. I had certainly not thought that anyone would take the course for a guaranteed A. And, I was shocked when I discovered she anticipated receiving an A because I had complimented her on sections of her paintings and had not been forceful enough in stating the negative.

Did I handle myself well in this first conference about grades with an unhappy student? In retrospect I would have to say ‘No.’ I know I became defensive and spent more time defending my position than listening to hers. I think, and this is embarrassing to admit, that I may have even resorted to sarcasm in our conference. I was so dismayed that someone would question my sincere efforts and I took the questions very personally.

But, what a valuable lesson to learn so early in my career! It taught me very early on to clarify instructions and to try and anticipate issues that might arise. Thanks to this student I developed a project survey that I continue to use each time I introduce a new project. Students are asked for their feedback on the clarity, value, and structure of the project, and projects are revised based on the feedback. Also, thanks to my first unhappy student, I began to develop clearer criteria and expectations with regard to grades. I now use a grading rubric, and have for the last 12 years, for every project and for the end of term portfolio review. This allows students to see how they were evaluated and gives us something concrete to discuss should a question about the grade arise.

I also learned about the necessity of documenting every conference with a student and keeping very accurate records. The end result is that I no longer am confronted with confusion and dismay —on both my part and the student’s —since I can simply pull up their information and we can go over it. It also assists when I am contacted for a reference for either employment or graduate school.

Does my ego still get in the way sometimes in a confer-

PAGE 12 ►

ence with a student? Yes, it does, but I no longer look at myself as failing the student and have come to view, with a great deal of humor, the fallibility of being infallible.

*Sherran Deems is a professor in the School of Foundation Studies at Savannah College of Art and Design.*

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## Neglecting to Cultivate a Research-Based Teaching Practice

*By Debra Schwietert, EdD.*

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**S**taying abreast of current research to benefit your teaching practice is one of the best things you can do for your self and your students. It's also something I feared I would not have time for once I was leading my own classroom. I was right.

As a student I was required to read research, which was excellent for my professional growth and development. It was a gift my teachers gave to me, and even though I enjoyed it, I didn't truly appreciate it at the time. The problem arose when reading research for my professional development was not required, but rather something I was to find time for on top of everything else on my plate as a new educator. Unfortunately, with all the demands and time constraints of teaching, reading professional literature went to the bottom of the to-do list.

When planning curriculum, usually the last thing on your mind is "what does the latest research have to say about teaching my topic." And yet, making time for research is well worth the effort and can strengthen your teaching skills as you work with students, plan student assignments, and anticipate and respond to teaching situations.

### The importance of staying current

Being a professional in a field under constant scrutiny, economic cuts, and high-stakes testing means that now more than ever teachers need to motivate and engage students in their learning. Your commitment to ongoing professional development and staying current on the latest

research will go a long way in helping you stay energized and enthused in the classroom.

This commitment also means reviewing and revising lessons on a yearly or semester basis. Although it's tempting to simply keep reusing proven plans, one of the best uses of your time will be to see how they fit into the current conversation in the research field. Are the strategies and technologies you're using still relevant, or is there a new technique you should try? Keeping your students engaged and motivated is worth the investment in time updating your lessons. You will serve your students best by applying your knowledge base to their learning needs.

I found that I learn best when learning is self-directed, related to life-experiences, goal oriented, relevant, practical, and respectful. When applying these strategies to students, I include telling them why it is important to learn the skills and concepts by relaying real-world connections, the importance to future learning, the relevance to their lives, and how the information can transfer to other content areas. It is important for students to feel a sense of responsibility for their learning and you will help them by relating learning to important areas.

When returning to the research databases as I pursued my doctorate, I realized the mistake I made which disconnected me from the goals I had for my teaching practice. I felt like I was returning to my passion and I decided I wanted to remain connected to these strategies and keep my students informed of them. I hope to inspire you to learn from my mistake and encourage you to excel in your practice even as you are starting out.

*Debra Schwietert, EdD, is an adjunct instructor at Black Hills State University.*

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## Understanding My Role as Facilitator

*By Denise Gaspard-Richards, PhD.*

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**I** first began teaching an undergraduate course via distance in 2000 with students located at remote sites across 15 countries. The course was delivered via teleconference and face-to-face tutorials delivered by local

PAGE 13 ►

tutors. The teleconferencing technology in use was new to me as my previous 10 years teaching in the content area was delivered in the face-to-face lecture format with me standing in front of a large class. Thinking back now, I acknowledge that there was very little evidence of exchange and interaction in my lecture style – essentially, I delivered the content by reading from my notes and the students wrote feverishly as I spoke. Every other lecturer in the institution was delivering in this way and I had no reason to think the experience could be different or even had a desire to change.

However, teaching via distance opened my eyes and caused me to engage in reflection as I now no longer had to deliver three hours of “live” lectures each week and there was no more reading from my notes and looking up to see my students taking notes and hanging on to my every word. This mode of teaching took some getting used to and just when I had found my rhythm, the department introduced its blended learning project. My course was first among those in the pilot to have an online component. This was 2002 and we were using WebCT.

At first I was enthusiastic at the idea of an online component, and the use of discussion boards to facilitate learning, since I had moved on to other career options in research and the online component fit well with my new status as “part-time faculty.” I could now commute less and I had access to a ready forum that would allow me to communicate with all of my 800-plus students across the distributed environment whenever I felt the need. It was a good feeling to be able to enter the virtual environment at my convenience and to receive individual feedback from my students at any time. It all seemed so easy during the orientation period when we were all meeting and greeting each other.

We started that first year with a new discussion topic posted every two weeks as the main teaching/learning activity and the discussion board was very active during the first few weeks. I now had the opportunity to put into practice the carefully detailed instructions and guiding notes prepared by the department to ensure that the facilitators in the pilot project designed the discussion topics to stimulate discussion among the students, and that facilitator responses served to assist them with clarifying their thoughts.

As instructor, I served as the course facilitator. It was supposed to work like this: I would post a discussion topic every other Sunday and the students would log on and post their individual response over each two week period. I was then supposed to guide the discussion and pose questions

or make statements to stimulate new ways of thinking about the concept being explored. I followed the instructions and guidelines prepared by the department to assist me, and I thought I was doing well and that learning was taking place. I did not have to wait to receive the results of the student course evaluations at the end of the semester to know that all was not well with my approach.

The program coordinator began commenting on my interaction by mid-semester. Based on the course materials, she thought that the student contributions seemed reasonable and asked why I was continuing to take the questioning approach exclusively. She suggested a more involved and participatory method to engaging the students. I was taken aback, after all, I was following the guidelines and instructions and I fully thought that I was guiding the students. My face-to-face lecturing experience had not prepared me for engagement and facilitation of learning. I was asking the following questions in response to discussion postings such as: “What other factors do you think would contribute to this phenomenon?” ....”How can this approach be improved?” ....”Have you considered the impact of X or Y?”

I thought I was on the right track so I persisted in this fashion despite the program coordinator’s suggestions. I was maintaining a daily presence in the course and I was convinced students needed to be guided in this way. Needless to say, the student evaluations at the end of the semester were not at all positive. For the most part, the students felt that I needed to “talk” with them, discuss their postings and tell them what they needed to do to improve. The questioning was seen as negative and they did not feel motivated to amend their postings or even continue to contribute to the discussions. The only motivation for them to continue was that they would ensure the receipt of participation marks that counted toward their final grade in the course. I was mortified. I had never received such a poor response to my teaching before.

On reflection now, I think that experience made me a better teacher. At the next offer of the course I was much less arrogant in my views. I did some research and adjusted my facilitation style. I started to engage my students and we “talked” through the discussion topics. We got to know each other and shared our experiences. My students were working adults who faced related challenges daily. They needed a friendly “voice” in the forums while they engaged in learning. It was not easy making the adjustment, but I tried in the best interest of my students. The course is now offered using a mix of blended and online learning modalities. I am no longer teaching it, but one of the tutors that I

mentored over a three-year period has adapted my style and the course environment is now dynamic and vibrant, full of engagement and demanding, motivated learners.

*Denise Gaspard-Richards, PhD., is Program Coordinator of Undergraduate Programs, Academic Programming and Delivery, at UWI Open Campus, St Augustine. ●*

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## What Works in One Culture May Not Work in Another

*By Osayimwense Osa, Ed.D.*

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I remember a teaching mistake that I made as a beginning teacher. Today, even after 30 years, it is still crystal clear in my memory.

We often hear about instructors who teach the way they were taught, and in a way that's what I did. I grew up with a very rigid, formal style of education. My mistake came from trying to impose that same type of discipline on

**I prided myself on running a disciplined classroom, and I am still like that today, but my background of discipline and solid rules does not always work perfectly in the American classroom. It certain didn't in this case.**

students that were unaccustomed to strict classroom rules and regulations.

My elementary schooling through my undergraduate degree took place in Nigeria from the late 50s through the early 70s. It was a strongly British colonial education—part of the legacy of British colonial presence in Nigeria from 1914 through 1960.

I wore a uniform to school every day until I entered the university in 1969. To wear your own clothes and not the prescribed uniform was frowned upon and sometimes earned some form of punishment for the violator. Using the school uniform stimulated in us a spirit of belonging to the

school and instilled a sense of discipline. In those days, most of us lived in the high school dormitories and we had rules that were enforced by a variety of student prefects—student leaders selected by the school administration to oversee essentially all aspects dormitory life with the assistance of house masters who lived on the high school campus. I served as a house prefect, but we also had food prefects, health prefects, social prefects, labor prefects, and more.

On all counts it was a successful system where we learned discipline very early in our academic lives. Even in the university, this discipline was still evident. There were fixed times for breakfast, lunch, and supper. Lecturers and professors were highly regarded as great masters of knowledge and were given their due respect. I cannot recall any student in my time calling a lecturer or a professor by his or her first name. Classes were structured and serious, and there certainly was no eating allowed in class. I brought this disciplined background into my high school teaching in the early 70s in Nigeria, and into an American college classroom of young people in 1978 after a brief two-year stint in Canada.

### Maintaining discipline

I believe that without order in the classroom, effective teaching and learning is impaired. Maintaining decorum, good order, and discipline in a classroom is one of the most difficult tasks facing young inexperienced teachers. But I did not see myself then as an inexperienced teacher except that I was new – teaching in an American college classroom. It was an eye opener to reality!

“Classroom chaos” was too weak of a term for what I saw at the beginning. Talking in class when not called upon to speak, and thinking it was normal to eat during class were strange to me. With regard to eating, I was quite firm in telling students that if every student brought food to class, then it was no longer a classroom but a cafeteria. I noted that quite a number of them did not like these new rules ... at the beginning at least. But by the end of the semester many appreciated my strict stance. Some indicated that the absence of food in the classroom helped them to better concentrate on classroom discussions and on what they were being taught.

I noted that there was a difference between the way college students in the U.S. interacted with their teachers and the way many African students interacted with their teachers. Not that American students were downright rude, but it was clear that they were much more assertive than anything I witnessed in my schooling. It seems that it has

PAGE 15 ►

gotten even worse since I started teaching in 1978/79 academic year.

I always believed that inappropriate or disruptive behaviors in the classroom could be effectively managed until I had this one experience early in my career. I sometimes walked around the classroom looking at what each student was doing – making sure they were taking notes on what was being discussed or taught. One day, I saw one of the students working on mathematical problems. That would have been fine except I was teaching English! I reacted by taking his mathematics book from him. But this student forcefully grabbed the book back from me shouting at the top of his voice, "You are taking advantage because you are an instructor. Now I am upset, I cannot concentrate!" He added other things and slowly packed his books and bag and walked out still talking.

After his exit, I calmly continued with my teaching. I was embarrassed, and quite a number of students were very uneasy about what had just happened. But I did learn something absolutely invaluable to my teaching. I learned first hand that what works in one culture may not work in another.

I prided myself on running a disciplined classroom, and I am still like that today, but my background of discipline and solid rules does not always work perfectly in the American classroom. It certainly didn't in this case. Perhaps I violated this student's space or his privacy when I "encroached" on his study of mathematics when in actuality he should have been participating in our English class. Perhaps there was a better way to handle it.

The incident was very upsetting to me, but as one elderly professor advised me, "don't give yourself heart attack, the situation is beyond repair." I guessed that "beyond repair" had to do with what the elder professor perceived as a somewhat blurred demarcation between teachers and students in American classrooms. I learned to understand that whatever is capable of creating unease, tension, or embarrassment in the classroom should be avoided by all means.

Whether the other students were actually taking in what was being discussed after the incident, I still cannot say even today. But they participated with zeal and learned that I encouraged and demanded maximum participation in class by all class members. I still have those same expectations today, but have learned to use more tact as I create the type of learning environment I want for my students.

*Osayimwense Osa, Ed.D., is a professor of English at Virginia State University. ●*

# Becoming Aware of the Instructional Value of Student Writing Samples

*By Barbara Looney, PhD.*

During the first two semesters I taught Managerial Communications, also known as business writing, I over relied upon the course textbook for models and guidance about the various types of business correspondence my students should master. Since I had not recently taught the subject and because the textbook was new to me, I felt most comfortable following the textbook assignment progression. Dutifully I featured for student discussions the sample documents offered by the publisher.

The text provided examples of well-written business correspondence. Each sample document had blue-ink margin notations to confirm proper style and highlight important content. Students presumably would learn how to write by following the models and replicating their features.

As a new teacher, I was a little slow to recognize the greater value of student models, when compared to the instructional value of the textbook models. Those first two semesters, I was so busy just getting through the textbook and meeting the course standards that I did not think to keep copies of successful student submissions and examples of major problems.

During the second semester, when I saw students repeating some of the same problems that had caused my first semester class to stumble, it occurred to me that I should collect and bank both strong and weak examples of all assignments so that I could organize the problem areas for more focused future instruction. By sharing problems as well as successes, I aimed to help students be more predictive about what to avoid and how to incorporate more effective word and style options.

Late that second semester my post-assignment feedback always featured overheads of what worked well in each assignment and what did not work so well. With my students' permission, I retyped sentences and paragraphs to preserve anonymity and offered both errors and suggested rewrites.

PAGE 16 ►

Experience soon taught me that students relate best to work that is most like their own in tone, vocabulary, and approach. While textbook examples serve as fine models, their very mature and professional style resonates less realistically with student writers than does a style more typical of what students actually produce. I now know that both the errors and the successes crafted by former students make superb examples for future classes.

Currently I preface each assignment with a list of common errors committed by prior students, and I couple these faults with suggested tips for how to strengthen writing and avoid the common pitfalls. My handouts of corrected errors have greatly improved what my students now produce. They see both pristine examples from the textbook and overheads with handouts showing student samples that worked well and not so well.

In each class I teach, I announce to students that I may save portions of their work for anonymous use in future classes as instructional samples. I ask anyone who might feel embarrassed by or uncomfortable with this technique to opt out. No student ever has.

*Barbara Looney PhD is an assistant professor at Black Hills State University, Spearfish, SD. ●*

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## Assumptions I Made in the Past and How I Come to Know My Students Now

*By Katrina Zook*

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**H**aving taught both large (450 students) and smaller music history courses (25 students) over a period of nearly 19 years, I found I had slowly created a set of assumptions about students' musical tastes, and their views about both popular and classical music. I generalized their preferences and musical experiences based upon where I was teaching at the time (CA, VA, NY, WY), and during which decade. As I spent more time reflecting about

my students and more effectively assessing each course after having taught it, I discovered that I was slow in learning about my students as individuals. I also found I was assuming I knew more about them than I was appropriately allowing them to reveal in class.

I subsequently devised an exercise that helped me learn more about my students, their musical backgrounds, and what experiences and interests they brought to the classroom. Due the second day of class, I ask that they submit a two-page essay describing their earliest musical memory, and continue by citing their current favored genre of music, and more specifically, WHY they are attracted to those sounds. I have read moving essays about lullabies sung by beloved grandmothers, dancing with parents to the Beach Boys as they cleaned house on Saturday mornings, and treasured moments with a dad as they sang their hearts out during a cattle drive.

Additionally, this assignment asks students to assess how they come to form their own aesthetic values, which ultimately gives them insight into who they are becoming as young adults.

I can well imagine that an assignment of this nature could be creatively applied to any number of disciplines. What I have found is that students are eager to tell me about themselves, and by sharing memories and personal opinions with me early on, we build a classroom relationship that's not built on assumptions. What I know or think about them comes directly from each of them and is based on the facts they choose to share with me.

### Waiting on the World to Change

During the 2008-2009 academic year, my first-year music history class and I attended a university-wide colloquium about creativity and the role of the artist in society. The guest speaker relayed how he asked his own students back East to collectively identify a popular song that spoke to them; a song that could perhaps serve as an "anthem" for their generation. His students ultimately chose John Mayer's 2006 Grammy award winning song "Waiting on the World to Change." He conveyed his wonder at their choice; his own generation did not wait for change, but rather assertively created societal change through organized action.

I discussed the East Coast students' choice with my own students (most of whom were from Wyoming and Colorado), and their answer was identical: "Waiting on the World to Change" was their unanimous choice. Further discussion was enlightening. The events of September 11, 2001 affected their then 11-year-old hearts and minds in a

PAGE 17 ►



way quite different from my own. They revealed that a primary message they processed from the atrocities of 9/11 was not to question those in power, and if they were to question, they would not be taken seriously. Hence they will need to wait until it is their turn to affect change in the world. That class conversation has remained with me and continues to remind me that I simply cannot assume that students who remember 9/11 look at the world the same way I did as an undergraduate. This seems an obvious point, but I fear it is one easily overlooked. Irrespective of one's political views regarding 9/11, the fact remains that children and young people were forever changed in ways we have yet to fully discover. Earnest discussion about 9/11 helped me understand how my particular class at least, and likewise another professor's class on the other side of the country, views their current place and role in society.

### What it Means to be a Student

Making assumptions about your students can get you in trouble in other ways, too. Particularly when you assume they know what's expected of them or even what it means to be a student.

Whether I am teaching first-year undergrads or second-year master's level students, I have learned that I must not assume they know what the goals and expectations are for the course, or fully understand the more general student/teacher conduct codes for the class. The most obvious vehicle for clearly outlining these details is the syllabus or course homepage. I, like most of my colleagues, continuously amend these vehicles based on the previous semester's experience. Were all bases covered? Did each student understand what was expected of them for each class meeting? Do they know my policy about cell phones and laptop usage during class? Did a new situation arise which needs to be addressed in the revised syllabus? Are issues of academic integrity clearly defined? Do students know the protocol for contacting me about an absence?

To me these aspects of "being a student" seem obvious, but each semester it becomes more apparent that they are not. I've found that keeping a running list of how you can continuously revise or clarify course expectations is extremely helpful whether you are new to the teaching profession or a seasoned academic.

General assumptions are part of being human. The trick is to recognize when you're assuming too much and then do something about it. In my academic life, I have learned ways to stop making these types of assumptions about my students by implementing a specific assignment, engaging in earnest discussion about a complicated and life-altering

event, and being clearer and more thorough in written and verbalized expectations.

*Katrina Zook is an associate professor in the Department of Music at the University of Wyoming.* ●

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## On a Frustrating Day or in a Troubled Class, Remember We All Make a Difference

*By Donald G. Schoffstall*

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There are often times that a need arises or something needs our immediate attention, yet very seldom do we take time for thought and reflection. Students come and go, in and out of our classrooms and our buildings and then before long, out of our school and into their world. It has been such a crazy year thus far and although you continue to push through various schedules and extra work loads, we still affect the student in our classrooms.

The first few months of 2009 were difficult and tiresome for me as I worked schedules for two programs in a curriculum transition, wrote and rewrote classes, and even missed the opportunity for a break in April. As one week in mid-May came to a close, I was relieved it was over. I also had two classes that were not the best experience and were quite challenging at times. I'm sure you've been there before.

As I read some of my reviews, they told a tale that I was not happy to hear. The comments hurt and I took them personally. I know the amount of effort I poured into each class everyday and the months of planning it took to write a course from scratch – but the students do not and that is OK. I guess to some my preparations, along with the information and knowledge I have to share, can be boring or tiresome and they may have ended the cycle excited to move on, feeling they wasted their time, but it is certainly not that way for all.

PAGE 18 ►

## A reaffirming experience

I had a wonderful opportunity on May 14, 2009 to be a part of something truly amazing. It was an event in which a group of educators and teachers honored parents, coworkers, and friends for the hard work and dedication they have showed to their schools. They shared stories of passion, commitment, fun times, and even sadness. The thing that was most impressive from all of these eight honored individuals were the lives they had touched and had a positive effect on, which was hundreds and in some cases thousands of students, their parents, and others. As I listened to these wonderful stories, tearing up at times, it began to make me think. Even when I may be having a bad day, dealing with a challenging student, or when things just did not go as planned, I am still making a difference for someone ... even though I may never know it.

With another term now closed; I look back and reflect on where I did make a difference. I received accolades from a student who will most certainly obtain his goal of running his own business one day and who, by the way, is as old as I am. I shared a few emotional moments with a female student was reminded, by a simple joke, about her troubled past and a previous dark moment. I listened to her, let her cry, and reassured her. I may not have taught her a thing in class, but it is not always that simple.

Finally, I am reminded of a student that has had to endure things in her career that none of us would ever probably volunteer to do, and yet she had done it with bravery and honor, and as my class neared its end was faced with the decision to leave school and continue to do whatever our country needed her to do as a member of the U.S. Air Force. If she thanked me once for being there for her, she must have thanked me a dozen times. She is still in my thoughts and prayers and carries my gratitude for her service, though I am not sure if I will ever see her again.

During graduation this past week, the hundreds of hands I shook were another reminder of the good work we do. I had the opportunity to meet former students, as well as their proud parents, siblings, and significant others who were there to share in their loved one's special moment. They could have just walked by, but yet in their moment stopped to introduce, to chat, and to see how I was doing.

I have established a folder filled with emails, comments, and feedback forms from students or others that are positive or enlightening in some way. This folder, simply labeled 'good stuff,' sits in my desk and is always there for

me if I need a pick up on a challenging day or a smile on a day that may seem grey.

We all will have the student, the class, or even more that we cannot touch, that we cannot help to see our passions, or to even develop their own. Yet, we continue each day and each class as a brand new opportunity because yesterday's student is not today's and today's student is certainly not tomorrow's.

I am a teacher, an educator, an instructor, a role model, an influencer, and sometimes just a friendly face that can be boring when he talks. But I know in my heart that I make a difference in the lives I touch, in whatever way or role I do it in, and that it may have been the first smile that student saw that day, or unfortunately, the last they may see.

*Donald G. Schoffstall, MS, CSC, CHE, FMP, is a management instructor at Pennsylvania Culinary Institute and a Doctorate of Education student at Liberty University. ●*

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## Disaster at the Casino: Betting on Subject Matter Expertise to Win Over Adult Students

*By Stan Weeber, PhD.*

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**T**his story is about how I botched a teaching assignment in – of all places – a casino. Thus, it is an academic story through and through, and not a tale of vacation woes such as befell the Griswolds in the movie *Vegas Vacation*.

In 2001, I taught college-level introductory sociology to a special group of adult learners. These learners were employees of a large, prosperous casino in Kinder, Louisiana, about 35 miles from the main campus of the university where I teach sociology full time. The Kinder class was part of my school's "outreach" program to the community. It was supposed to be a win-win scenario for

PAGE 19 ►

both the school and the casino.

The school was reaching out for new opportunities to serve. For the casino employees, it was an unexpected opportunity to earn some college credit after work, without having to travel 35 miles to the main campus. The students only needed to walk a few yards from the casino to a nearby building in order to take the class. For me, it was an opportunity to serve a new type of student. I was new to the school, and very enthusiastic. From the school's standpoint, it was an overload class designed to weather me through a period of low pay and to keep me from jumping ship to another university.

**The mistake I made in 2001 is perhaps so obvious today that no one would even think of making it. But my case demonstrates clearly that youthful zeal for your subject matter is no substitute for a thoughtful approach to a specialized adult learner audience.**

I was looking forward to this new task with gusto. I leapt headlong into adult collegiate education despite being warned by several people that I would have to take a "new and different approach" to teaching adults at the casino. I was kind of headstrong when it came to other peoples' advice, and I was resolved to let my vigor for the subject matter override any problems I might have with the students – these would be minor problems, of course. Not lacking in self confidence, I was sure that this was the right thing to do. These adults students were receiving tuition reimbursement from the casino for each class completed, so they deserved "the whole thing," the "complete program," "everything." Cutting corners just wouldn't do. Or so I thought.

Looking back, I can see that this was a monstrous error. I taught the class as "lecture only." The class met on Wednesday nights from 5:25 to 8:05 PM. The students got a 20 minute break about halfway through the class, and the students got to go home early, at 7:45. I thought this was enough of an adjustment for the "adult learners" who would be understandably tired after working all day.

It was obvious from the beginning that some of the students did not come from the privileged environment in

which I had been nurtured. One woman claimed to have lived on the streets of Los Angeles for a while. This same student had already taken the introductory sociology class from a nearby community college (and I have no idea why she wanted to retake the class). At community college, she said that they had "coloring books" in introductory sociology which made the class more interesting from her perspective.

This unruly student disrupted the class several times, demanding to know why she should be taking this class. I had no answer: she had already taken the class at community college. I bitterly complained to casino management about her behavior. She in turn bitterly complained to casino management about how boring the class was. The result was a draw, at least for the time being. She continued to attend class but was more subdued. I continued to teach, and tried to do whatever I could to make the class more interesting.

I do not remember the student's name and it doesn't matter now. Whoever she was, she managed to turn the entire class against me. I got the lowest student evaluation scores of my life from these adult learners. The low marks stood —and still stand — as an unsightly blemish upon an otherwise superb teaching record. Fortunately, I remembered how Stephen Brookfield had written about how you have to "bottom out" before you get better.

Surprisingly enough, the story had a happy ending: the school and casino allowed me back in 2002 for another introductory sociology class. This time I offered a varied approach befitting adult learners: discussion, PowerPoint presentations, in class and out of class assignments (including Internet-based assignments), role playing, fewer and shorter tests, and a much shorter lecture period. The students' evaluation of my work improved dramatically. I went back to teach one last time in 2003, again with good results. In 2006 I earned tenure at my school, and in 2009 off-campus outreach classes are still taught in Kinder, Louisiana, near the site of the casino.

The mistake I made in 2001 is perhaps so obvious today that no one would even think of making it. But my case demonstrates clearly that youthful zeal for your subject matter is no substitute for a thoughtful approach to a specialized adult learner audience. I found out that you cannot approach adult college education in exactly the same way as traditional college education.

*Stan Weeber, PhD. is an associate professor of sociology at McNeese State University, Lake Charles, LA. ●*

# Teaching Mistakes: Four Lessons for Beginning Instructors

By Megan S. Grayce, JD, MBA

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I cringe when I think about all the mistakes I made as a new instructor all those years ago! As a new instructor I was rich with experience and content knowledge in my field but lacked experience in teaching in higher education. I was literally thrown into the classroom with no information about teaching methodologies, learning styles, lesson plans, retention strategies, peer-to-peer learning, etc. In other words, I struggled with tremendous anxiety until I realized on my own, I was doing a disservice to my students and I better do some self-study if my institution is not going to provide any training. I later went on to obtain a professional doctorate degree unrelated to teaching, but kept my hand in higher-education teaching for many years as an adjunct instructor. I continued my self-study program of reading numerous books on how to teach in higher-education.

The purpose of this article is to help new instructors reduce their anxiety and maximize their effectiveness when they teach their first class in higher education. This article will also assist program directors and deans of education of primarily proprietary institutions, who generally hire adjunct faculty to teach the majority of their courses (it is an economically sound business practice), to assist new instructors in their initial teaching assignments. The goal is to have a win-win-win situation for all parties – the instructors, the program directors, and most importantly the students we serve.

**Lesson #1: It is not enough to possess the content knowledge.** This is a classic assumption new instructors believe when they apply to teach their first course that leads to major problems in the classroom. Program directors also often assume content knowledge is sufficient in hiring new faculty. For example, if the college has a paralegal program, the program director will most often hire lawyers and assume two things: 1) they can teach and; 2) they can teach law in a way a paralegal needs to know the law (as opposed to a lawyer). Hiring on these assumptions has devastating results for all parties, but most importantly the students. Lawyers are not trained in teaching various teaching methodologies, identifying

different student learning styles, preparing lesson plans, etc.

As one program director stated “... I also remind my instructors that we are not teaching law classes. Although our students need to be well prepared, these are Associate’s degree-level courses. They are not being trained to be lawyers” (Frohirth, 2009, p.20). Hiring instructors solely based on their content knowledge and experience can often put too much pressure on instructors and students. Instructors often forget the rule of OSANU – Our Students Are Not Us!

If colleges are going to hire instructors with strong content knowledge but who lack any teaching experience, they must provide an orientation program that is content rich with teaching methodologies, lesson plan preparation, student learning styles, retention strategies and the like well before the instructor ever steps into the classroom. Program directors need to monitor new instructors closely and frequently sit in on their classes and provide immediate feedback to assist them in becoming more effective instructors. After all, we were all “newbies” at one time.

**Lesson #2: Use lesson plans – they really do work!** I can’t stress enough how much better your classes will go if you use a lesson plan. There are many forms of lesson plans available on the Internet, just pick one that works for you or your college may already provide one they prefer you use. I suggest you select a lesson plan that you can fill in electronically and save as a document you can edit at a later date. Lesson plans aid the instructor in defining the objectives for the class, staying on track, achieving the stated objectives, and avoid frustrations.

Instructors who develop lesson plans are able to visualize (and, therefore, better prepare for) every step of the teaching process in advance. This visualization of the classroom experience increases teacher-student success. Lesson plans also provide the instructor a record for the instructor to reflect on what was actually accomplished in the class, identify areas that may need to be improved upon, what teaching methods worked well and what did not and then improve on it in the future. Lesson plans are great time savers for the future when you teach the same class again because you can “recycle” the successful elements of the prior lesson plans to generate new lesson plans for the next course.

**Lesson #3: Read books to enhance your teaching skills.** My recommended reading list is exhaustive. However, there are a few classics that should be on every new instructor’s reading list: The Joy of Teaching by Peter

PAGE 21 ►

Filene and *Teaching Today's College Students* by Angela Provitera McGlynn. Filene (2005) succinctly identifies issues that come up for new instructors such as understanding your students. In particular, he addresses the issue of teaching "... at a community college or at a university that accepts 90 percent of applicants, [where] your students will likely come from working-class backgrounds.... As a result, they contend with obstacles that most twenty-year-old middle-class students don't face" (Filene, 2005, p. 18).

This may sound like an obvious issue to many instructors, but if you did not attend a college where they accepted 90 percent of the applicants and you are now teaching in such a college, your tendency will be to model your teaching style after what you observed as a college or graduate student of a very different institution and that will be a major disaster in a community college with students who have multiple issues with work schedules, family issues, housing, transportation and more. In addition, your classroom will be made up of multiple generations and ethnic backgrounds which make the classroom dynamics that much more complex (Filene, 2005, p. 19).

Filene (2005) also provides practical advice on key practices for new instructors on constructing a syllabus, lecturing, relating to the students, evaluation and grading. In my opinion, Filene's book is helpful to the new instructor as an instructional guide and to experienced instructors as a refresher or reminder of best practices.

McGlynn (2007) covers four major areas in her book: 1) defining today's college students and the challenges that presents; 2) the comparison of generations in the student population and the effect that has in the classroom; 3) classroom management; and 4) teaching to promote active learning and critical thinking. McGlynn thoroughly explains the challenges instructors face on a day-to-day basis in the classroom and provides real solutions to these challenges.

For example, McGlynn discusses how to handle the "Class Monopolizer" (McGlynn, 2007, p. 85). While an inexperienced instructor may welcome these students and view them as participative and competent, class monopolizers are "...compulsive communicators...who dominate classroom discussion. These students consistently communicate in class more than their peers do, and they often seem unaware of the potentially negative impact they are having on their teachers and classmates.... All in all, compulsive talkers can create an atmosphere that is not conducive to the best interests of the whole class" (McGlynn, 2007, p. 85).

**Lesson #4: Find and use a mentor.** Any successful professional will tell you they have used at one time or another, a mentor. In my opinion the most successful professionals always have a mentor in their life to provide them with guidance and leadership. A good mentor will affect your professional life by fostering insight, identifying knowledge gaps, and expanding growth opportunities.

One caveat – be very selective in choosing your mentor. I strongly suggest selecting a mentor outside your organization but within your professional field. Selecting a mentor outside your institution eliminates the appearance of favoritism or conflict between your mentor and your manager and other employees. Lastly, be sure to check out the credibility and reputation of your mentor. Select someone who is well respected and has a proven track record of success in their field, is personally compatible and understands and values the mentoring process.

Now take a deep breath and exhale with gratitude and have a good laugh at your own expense if you have made a few common teaching mistakes. Know you are in good company because being in higher education assumes you are dedicated to life-long learning and passing on knowledge to others and that is a wonderful thing. Lastly, remember the old Chinese proverb about the student "Teachers open the door. You enter by yourself."

*Megan S. Grayce, JD, MBA, has been teaching for more than eight years and is now pursuing her PhD in Education with a specialty in Higher Education Leadership.*

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