Reflective Teaching Portfolio:

Keeping it Real by Making it Relevant

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TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

*Teachers open the door. You enter by yourself.* ***—Chinese Proverb***

The basis of my philosophy of teaching is community. I strive to create an inclusive classroom environment that not only encourages and facilitates learning but also makes students *want* to learn. After several years of teaching, I have recognized that students who are invested in the community of the classroom have a higher rate of success.

There are several ways to build that community, and these vary, depending on whether the class is face to face or online. In every face-to-face class I have taught, I always begin with a few minutes of announcements, asking students if they have anything they would like to share. It is interesting to watch the progression over a fifteen-week semester: at the beginning only a few share, yet by the end of the semester most do. Students, then, are more alert and prepared to discuss the course subject matter. In online classes, I begin the semester with an “Introductions” forum, and ask students to introduce themselves. I also invite them to use this forum throughout the semester for communication among themselves; for example, students have posted job openings or requests for textbooks.

It is important that students understand how what I have to teach is pertinent to their own lives, so I encourage students to seek out articles, trends, or any other current event-type material to share with the class. Students receive extra credit for this. Invariably the day’s lesson is much improved by “keeping it relevant.” Online students definitely feel more invested in the class when they contribute to the material of the week’s lesson in this way.

I continue to build a foundation of community in other ways. Early in the semester in face-to-face classes I assign in-class small group projects and individual mini research projects. For the small group projects, I might ask students on the first day of the semester to consider the implications of the title of the course in breakout groups—the meaning of the words “American” and “literature” in an American literature course, perhaps. This kind of contemplative exercise encourages a comfortable level of intimacy with classmates that carries through for the rest of the semester. For a mini research project, I might ask students to research a book that has been banned or challenged (I do this in conjunction with Banned Books Week) and present the research to the class. The research itself takes only a few minutes, but the student then becomes an expert with information to share with the class. Providing students with empowerment in this way makes them see themselves—and me, since often they discuss details of which I am unaware—as just part of a group of learners. In online classes, I set up some discussion boards with the entire class and some with smaller groups, so that relationships can develop among a handful of students while they retain a connection to the larger community.

Critical thinking skills are at the heart of the learning process within the classroom community. This is an overused phrase but, unfortunately, an under-taught process. One way I encourage more critical analysis is through, paradoxically, undermining (temporarily) the comfort of the classroom community, perhaps by challenging preconceived notions; for example, I might complicate conceptions of patriotism, in a history module, or feminism, in a Women’s Studies unit. If I have done my job, the students learn to be comfortable debating all sides of an issue without projecting or feeling any sense of attack from disparate points of view. I remind my students who express discomfort at new ways of considering old ideas that increasing knowledge and awareness is often a painful process, so a little tension should be not only expected but welcome. I sometimes tell them that if at least one of my assignments has not made them a little uncomfortable, I am disappointed! In online classes, this skill is enhanced further because students generally think before they respond to a discussion board post, which is not always the case in face-to-face classes.

While the classroom or learning management system is where most of the learning will take place, I expand upon that environment by encouraging attendance at office hours, including virtual conversations. I also encourage learning outside the classroom through extra credit assignments, such as visits to museums (wherever students are located) or attendance at relevant lectures at FIT (videos of presentations are often available for online students to view).

I believe the best teachers are those who retain a sense of wonder at the process of learning and hunger to continue. I recently took Latin 101 and 102 at my local community college, and I am taking independent study with the same professor in preparation for continuing my Latin studies at the university near my home. I often share stories from my Latin classes with my students, assuring them that I understand what life is like on their side of the syllabus. Hopefully, the enthusiasm I demonstrate for learning is infectious.

TEACHING GOALS

*“The mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making a man think and do for himself....”* ***—****Carter G. Woodson, The Mis-Education of the Negro*

My goal in all of my classes is to make sponges. I tell my students that the most important thing I learned in my undergraduate education was *how* to learn—how to absorb and process information, in order to be useful both to myself and my society.

While critical thinking skills are important, I also want students to leave my classroom with a connection to the world outside of FIT, so that they not only function in that larger community but also feel connected—and responsible. Recently, social justice has become an integral part of my lessons; I want students to be advocates—to know they have agency to act. I certainly do not expect them to share my passions, but I encourage them to find their own.

I expect online students to gain comfortable familiarity with functioning in the online environment, since the LMS is not substantively different from the kinds of systems they can expect to utilize in future careers.

SUCCESSFUL CLASSROOM STRATEGIES, NOW AND FOR THE FUTURE

*“In the inimitable phrasing of Slosson****, ‘Lecturing is that mysterious process by means of which the contents of the note-book of the professor are transferred through the instrument of the fountain pen to the note-book of the student without passing through the mind of either.’” —attributed to Edwin Emery Slosson in a text by Harry Lloyd Miller.***

The academy rages on these days about the value of the traditional lecture. I believe that lecturing is an important part of the learning process—students should learn to listen and process when another is speaking—but for optimum student learning there must be a balance between lecturing and other forms of study. Lessons that give students an opportunity to participate more actively that in a traditional lecture invariably give them greater investment in the learning process. In a typical three-hour class, I will lecture for perhaps thirty to forty minutes, although not always in the same segment of the class each week and not necessarily in one block of time. In online classes, each lesson begins with a VoiceThread presentation that provides context for the rest of the lesson; VoiceThread gives students the opportunity to pause and rewind and listen again, which aids in comprehension

I alternate lecture with class discussion, visual presentations (images and/or videos), small group work, and special activities. Special activities include, for example, debates or role playing. In a literature class, I will have students debate the merits of two sides of an argument. In a writing class, I ask students to personify Ethos, Pathos, or Logos. One way I envision incorporating more technology into these face-to-face lessons is to record students in these situations and have them watch and comment or critique, with constructive suggestions.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE VIRTUAL AND BRICK-AND-MORTAR CLASSROOM

Technology has always been at the forefront of human education. From the days of carving figures on rock walls to today, when most students are equipped with several portable technological devices at any given time, technology continues to push educational capabilities to new levels. In looking at where educational methods and tools have come from to where they are going in the future, technology’s importance in the classroom is evident now more than ever. ***—Purdue University Online [online.purdue.edu/ldt/learning-design-technology/resources/evolution-technology-classroom]***

Every semester I incorporate more technology in the face-to-face classroom. Thanks to YouTube and LYNDA, I am able to incorporate more videos, for example. LYNDA offers such a variety of videos that there are pertinent videos for all of my classes. Sometimes, I show a video providing a version of the material I just lectured about—yes, it can be repetitive; however, the opportunity to hear the same material presented in a different way absolutely aids in retention. For example, formerly, I lectured about plagiarism and annotated bibliographies, and hoped students understood. I still do, but now I also show videos that provide demonstrations of acceptable citations styles and effective annotations. I supplement these a third time with handout samples—that I can also post to Blackboard! Student understanding has increased measurably.

Blackboard also allows me to keep in touch with my face-to-face students when there is a disruption to the school schedule, such as a snow day. I post updated assignments schedules, for example. When we do have to miss class, I start up “pop-up” discussion boards, so that students stay connected to the class, even if the topic is something fun. For my science-fiction class, I post my reviews of the latest genre films, for example. I also use Blackboard to post links to resources that are pertinent, such as links to our library databases and the Purdue Online Writing Lab website.

I have chosen not to include videos that just show me talking. While I encourage dialogue, I do not believe that sticking my face into a presentation enhances the learning in any measurable way. In one VT lecture that discusses the founding of the National Park System I included a picture of me in Grand Tetons National Park, to help humanize me a bit for the students, but I do not see how a talking head improves a video.

The online environment does create some unique challenges. For example, recently a student posted what could be classified as hate speech in a Blackboard discussion board. I edited the post and emailed her privately about my concerns. She was rueful and apologetic, and thanked me for the edit. I realized that this was not something that was as likely to happen in a face-to-face class—people have become used to carelessness in online environments. I do post a graphic about netiquette, and I refer students to proper behavior, something I rarely have to do in a physical classroom.

Online teaching has enriched my face-to-face classes. Some of the VoiceThreads I created for the online version of one of my classes I now show in my face-to-face classroom. I can use the recorded narration or use a more impromptu narration. My experience with VoiceThread has made me much more likely to use images in the classroom than before, as well.

Increasingly, in both styles of classroom, I am encouraging my students to use new technology for their final research projects. They can submit traditional research papers, or be adventurous and submit a VoiceThread or even a video. As technology advances, I hope to continue to incorporate tech products into my curriculum—perhaps students will be able to offer virtual reality presentations. At a recent tech presentation at FIT, the participants presented some VR “tours” of destinations; as these become more common, I am hopeful that there will be tours of places relevant to my teaching, that my students can “take.” FIT student are also designing their own VR spaces; perhaps in the future there will be inter-curricular cooperation that will encourage design students to create VR spaces that will be useful for other departments at FIT.

CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS: THE BIGGER PICTURE AT FIT

*While ensuring the free flow of ideas by word and image care should be exercised that all cultures can express themselves and make themselves known.* —*Article 6, UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*

One of the great benefits of being a part of the FIT community is the diversity of our community, on so many levels. It is part of my job as the facilitator in the classroom—virtual or face-to-face—to ensure that all students feel safe and comfortable, and have the opportunity to express themselves, and more importantly, be heard. Our classroom communities must be spaces where tolerance is not only passively expected but actively pursued. Also, I am aware that for many of my students, English is a second language. Increasingly, I use slides with bullet points to accompany my lectures, so that while I require students listen to me, they also have a sense of the organization of the material of the lecture. One of the benefits of using technology in my face-to-face classroom is that if second-language speakers struggle to keep up in the classroom, they can review online materials—such as YouTube videos used in class—in their own time.

When designing my online course material, I ensure that everything is ADA compliant, and I strive to use images, fonts, and backgrounds that facilitate access.

In all of my classes I encourage my students to speak about their own experiences and the connections they are making for themselves between the course materials and their own communities. For example, over the years, students have shared how the events of World War II are taught in Turkey—or even in Germany. They have shared their experiences of how women are treated in India and how children are raised in China. These experiences enrich all of the students’ (and my own!) understanding not only of the course material but also of its relevance to our global community.