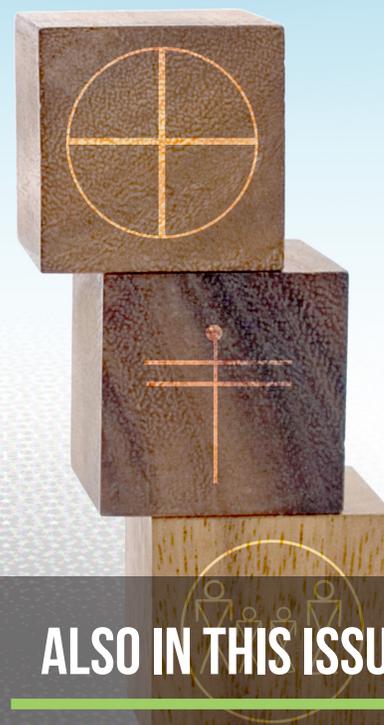
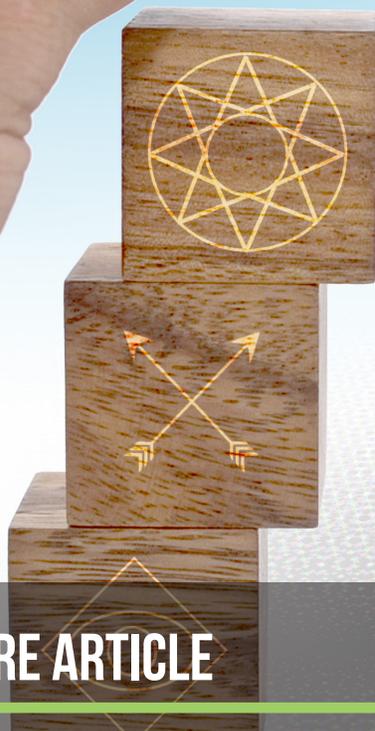




# Light

ON TEACHING



## FEATURE ARTICLE

### A Story of Bridging Cultures in the Classroom

by Janay Nugent, Martha Many Grey Horses, Mariah Besplug, and Charlene Oka

## ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- Making Connections Through Undergraduate Research
- Ages and Stages
- The Third Academic Freedom

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# Director's Message

by David Hinger

Welcome to the fourth annual Teaching Centre's "A Light on Teaching" magazine. As we head into the fall semester, I am once again inspired by the articles in this year's publication. Faculty share and reflect on new ways of teaching and learning, and how they can more deeply engage our students. I hope you enjoy reading their stories as much as I did, and welcome an opportunity to explore these and other teaching topics over the coming year. The Teaching Centre offers a wide variety of initiatives to support and promote the enhancement of teaching and learning at the University of Lethbridge. Here are just a few highlights from the 2015-16 academic year:

Shop Talk is an informal noon-hour series designed to explore a plethora of teaching-related topics, such as classroom technology, Moodle, effective assessment, and student engagement. This year we are expanding this series to include some specific sessions related to dealing with student plagiarism.

Scholarship of teaching and learning is an important area of growth for the Teaching Centre, and I am particularly proud of the number of faculty who are engaging in research on teaching and learning at the U of L. Thanks to a generous donation this year, the Teaching Centre was also able to fund nine teaching conference travel funds, enabling recipients to attend and present at a variety of teaching and learning conferences.

Moodle support continues to be a cornerstone of the services that we provide to support teaching at the U of L. This year, we once again experienced an increase in utilization of this teaching tool, and we anticipate additional growth over the coming years. One area of significant growth is in our invigilated testing centre. During our fall and spring semesters, we facilitated over 50,000 exams, utilizing our three testing rooms. The feedback we receive from students continues to be positive, stating flexibility to write an exam as the most beneficial aspect of this service. If you would like to learn more, please come by to see one of our educational consultants.

As I reflect on the many accomplishments of the Teaching Centre during the 2015-16 academic year, I must once again acknowledge all of the faculty and instructors who contribute to our initiatives. In May, the Teaching Centre staff was honoured with the President's Award for Service Excellence. We share this recognition with the Board of Governors' Teaching Chairs, Teaching Fellows, and faculty from across campus who

help make our initiatives a success. From Talking about Teaching to the articles in this magazine, your commitment to teaching excellence at the U of L is commendable.

As the 50th anniversary of the U of L approaches, it is a great time to reflect on where we have been and where we should focus our attention for the future of our institution. With construction begun on our new science and academic building, we can already begin to envision the growth and evolution of our campus. I hope the articles in this year's magazine inspire you to reflect on your own teaching and how we all can continue to enhance teaching and learning at the U of L.

Teaching  
CENTRE



# A Story of **BRIDGING CULTURES** in the Classroom



by Janay Nugent, Martha Many Grey Horses, Mariah Besplug, and Charlene Oka

*Janay Nugent is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the U of L, a Teaching Fellow in the Teaching Centre, and the 2016 winner of the Distinguished Teaching Award.*

*Martha Many Grey Horses is Director of Iikaiskini FNMI Gathering Place, the Chair for the U of L Truth and Reconciliation Committee and the Chair for the U of L Aboriginal Education Committee. Martha is also a member of the Kainai First Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy.*

*Charlene Oka and Mariah Besplug are both U of L undergraduate students. Mariah is an Anthropology/Social Studies Education major and Charlene is a General Social Science major and member of the Kainai First Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy.*

In early January 2016 Dr. Martha Many Grey Horses, University of Lethbridge Director of Iikaiskini First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) Gathering Place, decided to bring two Buffalo Women to campus to speak about traditional Blackfoot family and child-rearing practices. Jacqueline Preyde had suggested the Women and Gender Studies, Representations of Parenthood class as a group who would be interested in such a talk. Members of the Buffalo Women's Society are elders of high character who hold special spiritual or cultural knowledge. Although writings by indigenous authors and FNMI topics were already included in the course readings, to have two esteemed women from the Buffalo Women's Society come to visit the class was a huge honour and unique opportunity for the students. What follows is an explanation by Martha Many Grey Horses of why she decided to organize this talk on campus, followed by Janay Nugent's reflections on the talk and how it enriched her curriculum, and the essay ends with reflections by Mariah Besplug and Charlene Oka, two students in the class, on what these guest speakers meant to them.

**Dr. Martha Many Grey Horses,  
Director of Iikaiskini FNMI  
Gathering Place**

Janay Nugent from the Department of History, Institute for Child and Youth Studies, and I collaborated on a project that was delivered in her class during the winter semester of 2016. Our collaboration aligned with the following recommendations that were outlined in the University's 2009-13 Strategic Plan:

- Increasing the participation of FNMI peoples in all aspects of the University community,
- Providing a visible demonstration of the value we place on our relationship with FNMI peoples, and
- Facilitating our ability to collaborate widely to develop programs that are relevant and available to FNMI peoples.

This partnership brought alive the vision of the Iikaiskini FNMI Gathering Place that was written in the 2012 FNMI Report to the President. The vision is about the celebration of the vibrancy of the FNMI cultural community within an academic community, and in a setting where Blackfoot and other Aboriginal languages are spoken, and a place where students can explore new knowledge together.

The forces of this vision were personified by the Buffalo Women who were the guest speakers. The presentations of Sophie Tailfeathers and Georgette Fox fostered cross-cultural awareness and encouraged personal, social, intellectual, and cultural interactions between Blackfoot and other FNMI peoples and the University. The Buffalo Women promoted more informed knowledge and understanding of Blackfoot values, history, culture, and customs as they facilitated the infusion of Blackfoot cultural knowledge into this course. The authentic voice of the Buffalo Women encouraged cultural sensitivity and hopefully will inspire effective pedagogy that offers activities such as managing cross-cultural conversations leading to respectful, supportive, and welcoming learning environments for all students.

Community members such as elders, ceremonialists, and artists serve as “knowledge holders” or “knowledge keepers” who are charged with the responsibility of preserving and passing on the sacred stories, songs, language, culture, and traditions of First Nations people. This knowledge and skill has been handed down through many generations. Our knowledge keepers may have expertise in the following areas: traditional storytelling, Niistitapi philosophies, family and kinship systems, gender relations, child-rearing practices, traditional songs, and social and spiritual protocol. It is this kind of knowledge that was imparted to the students of Janay Nugent.

### **Dr. Janay Nugent, course instructor for WGST 3040: Representations of Parenthood**

In this course we used a feminist lens to deconstruct discourses surrounding parenthood. Through an examination of the intersectionality of parenthood with class, ethnicity, age, ability, and sexual identities, students began to identify how normative representations are created and why they are important to understanding power structures in our society. My students were very excited about

the visit of the Buffalo Women. Because our guests, Sophie Tailfeathers and Georgette Fox, were so special, I opened up the class to faculty and students of the Institute for Child and Youth Studies, as well as Dr. Sheila McManus’s NAS American Indian History class. We met in the SCALE-UP classroom, which does not have a “front of the room.” (see photo below) The classroom configuration and moveable furniture worked perfectly to create an informal, intimate, and conversational atmosphere. Our speakers, who admitted to being nervous speaking to a group of non-indigenous students, were spared the discomfort of arranged formality and the pressures of being placed on stage. Our students rolled their chairs around until they found a spot where eye contact with the speakers could occur. The classroom helped to bridge the generations and cultures in the room as we were welcomed into a most extraordinary conversation.

The class began with Sophie Tailfeathers offering a prayer in Blackfoot. Many of our students had never heard the Blackfoot language spoken before, and they were to continue to be treated to the beauty of the language as Martha and our two speakers would switch between Blackfoot and English as they shared their stories, conversing and reminiscing with one another. The preciousness of the language to each of them, its centrality to the Blackfoot culture and to child-rearing practices became very clear. You can read about the importance of language in a book or be told it through a video, but our understanding grew exponentially as we were brought into the storytelling. Our speakers used phrases in the Blackfoot language to explain, describe, and remember. Often laughing through the stories, the audience began to have a deeper and more intimate understanding of the significance of the language to identity and culture. We began to see that cultural understanding and wisdom is wrapped up in the Blackfoot language, and this connection to language is entwined with the emotional connection to their children and child-rearing practices. Those present sat transfixed as Sophie Tailfeathers told a story about soothing one of her great-grandchildren.

She demonstrated how she wrapped him tightly and then sang for us the Blackfoot lullaby she had tenderly sung to her great-grandson. The emotion that spread through the class was palpable. Through this story we connected with Sophie’s love of her great-grandson and his place within the Blackfoot culture, but also haunting was the disconnection that many of the younger generation have to traditional child-rearing practices.

Through our engagement with the storytelling, an understanding and respect for Blackfoot culture grew among members of the class. The conversation was so rich that regardless of the knowledge with which a student entered the room, their respect for Blackfoot culture, ways of knowing, and the legacy of colonization deepened. As a scholar of child and youth studies, I was particularly struck by where resiliency could be found among young survivors of residential school. The stories told by the Buffalo Women and Martha of children engaging in clandestine dormitory powwows, speaking the forbidden Blackfoot language despite reprimands, and tricking teachers with made-up stories of assimilation stand as testament to the power of Blackfoot language and culture in fostering resiliency among some of the children who survived residential school. For my students, indigenous or not, these stories provide context and understanding of why child welfare, education, and language and culture, the first three issues addressed in the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, are so important to FNMI communities.

### **Mariah Besplug, student**

Earlier this spring I had the pleasure of being included in a visit with Buffalo Women Sophie Tailfeathers and Georgette Fox. As a third-year student studying anthropology and social studies education, this was an amazing opportunity to learn with elders from the First Nations community. Throughout my education, I have come to understand the importance of including Aboriginal perspectives into the learning experience. This type of inclusion is important because it gives students such as myself the skills to tackle real-world problems with a respect and understanding for multiple viewpoints. Often the perspective of indigenous thinkers is shared through a textbook or video. By visiting our class, these women pulled the First Nations perspective away from paper and into the real world. What is special about being part of a conversation or story is that it is not cemented in time, but is a dynamic piece of speech that shows feelings, emotions, and change. As a learner in the class, this grounded my understanding of parenting in real-world experiences. In particular, it helped shine a light on First Nations parenting techniques that I had not previously known about. As a future educator, this visit gave me a great example of



the unique ways that I can bring Aboriginal perspectives into the social-studies curriculum. I hope that experiences such as this will encourage other instructors to bring elders into the classroom as well.

Storytelling was one of the major ways that they shared their ideas. From an anthropological perspective, storytelling is a major way to create community and networks. On a personal level, their visit was an incredibly unique way to join the community and network that has come together for truth and reconciliation. By learning directly from these women, it was easy to become enveloped in the stories that they told. As a student who does not come from a First Nations background, it is easy to feel distanced or separated from the healing that has begun to take place in Canada. I am thankful that these women chose to speak with a group of students from diverse backgrounds because I believe this widened the scope of healing to include students such as myself. By learning and talking about their history, I was welcomed into the community and network that will move forward in order to heal a very special community. The feeling of inclusion into this process is something that will guide my actions and attitudes for years to come.

### Charlene Oka, student

The story: "Sit here, my child, and watch me close as I prepare the sacred smudge. I will then tell you a story. The reason I will use the smudge is so you will never forget that which I will share with you. And in time, when it is your turn to share with your children exactly as I will share with

you, in this way, things will never change."

Sa'ksisakiaaksin, Laurie Big Plume

Oki Nitaniko Iniiskimakii. Hello, my Blackfoot name is Buffalo Stone Woman. My English name is Charlene Oka. I am a Blackfoot student from the Blood Reserve in my fourth year of study. It gives me great pleasure to talk about the importance of elders within our community and the role they play among First Nations across Canada. Sophie Tailfeathers and Georgette Fox contributed important information to our class regarding representations of parenthood. The elders explained to the students the importance of storytelling and how it is a gift among Blackfoot people. A requirement among Blackfoot people is for young children to spend as much time as possible with grandparents. It is the responsibility of grandparents to teach legends and stories and the ways of their people. In this way they state that a closeness develops between the very young and the old. It is in this way that their history and heritage have been accurately handed down through the ages. Because the languages are not written, they rely on the oral traditions. The Buffalo Women's visit was important for me as a student to hear the stories they shared with the class. Our elders share knowledge and pass down information from one generation to the next. As a Blackfoot student and single parent, it is difficult to reach out to my elders who are living on the reserves. Having a visit from the Buffalo Women made me feel proud knowing that our elders from the Blood Reserve are being recognized for their oral stories. I feel like my direction is being guided and the knowledge they shared with the classroom will be shared with future generations.

### Conclusion

This was a powerful experience and provides an illustrative example of the importance of Michelle Hogue's argument that making our curriculum inclusive of Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning "is critical for the engagement, retention and success of 21st-century learners, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal inclusive." (Hogue, 2015) Recommendation 63.iii of the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission encourages educators to build "student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect." The experience of learning from the Buffalo Women allowed those present to begin pursuing that critical mandate.

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# Great Job Janay

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# THE THIRD ACADEMIC Freedom

*We believe autonomy is essential for our own academic success. Why don't we insist on it for our students?*



by Daniel Paul O'Donnell,  
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Gal, Virgil Grandfield, Heather  
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## **Academic freedom: Good for the instructor, but not the student?**

A defining feature of life in academia is the degree to which we get to decide what is important to us.

In many fields there is broad agreement as to what must be taught or what the major research questions are. But there are, outside some certification requirements in the professional faculties, no provincial or national curricula we are required to follow.

In our work as researchers, we decide what topics and approaches are interesting and appropriate to pursue. We set our own research agendas and,

through our citation and publication patterns and our service on editorial and funding boards, we decide collectively what our generation considers to be the most important questions and results.

Not everybody shares in this autonomy, of course, including a growing number of adjunct faculty. And even for those of us who do share in it, a few brilliant exceptions aside, the exercise of our freedom is constrained by our need to work within the consensus and reward systems we have helped establish. But for the most part the working lives of tenured researchers and teachers, at the very least, are marked by a remarkable degree of autonomy.

This is not, as a rule, however, how things work for our students.

The academic freedom we enjoy as researchers and teachers was developed, in its modern form, in nineteenth-century German universities. But the theorists who defined our *Lehrfreiheit* (freedom of teaching) and *Freiheit der Wissenschaft* (freedom of research) also defined a third freedom, which they considered equally fundamental: *Lernfreiheit*, or the freedom to determine the course of one's own study.

As Fuchs notes in his history of the translation of Academic Freedom to the United States, however, this third, student-centred freedom “has on the whole received secondary consideration” (Fuchs 1963, 432). Our students are, for the most part, told what they should learn, how and when they should learn it, how their learning will be evaluated, and, in the end, how well they have learned what we taught them. In most modern university systems, students do enjoy some agency in their choice of their majors and courses. But this autonomy stops the moment the “shopping period” ends: after that it tends to be the instructor and the syllabus that decide what is going to happen.

Given how important autonomy is to our work as lecturers and researchers, this lack of agency on our students’ part is surprising. It also contradicts much of what we know about pedagogical best practice. As Hattie notes in an impressive review of over 800 meta-studies of pedagogical practice,

the art of teaching reaches its epitome of success after the lesson has been structured, after the content has been delivered, and after the classroom has been organized. The art of teaching, and its major successes, relate to “what happens next”—the manner in which the teacher reacts to how the student interprets, accommodates, rejects, and/or reinvents the content and skills, how the student relates and applies the content to other tasks, and how the student reacts in light of success and failure apropos the content and methods that the teacher has taught. (2008, chap. 1)

Many of the most effective interventions discussed in his study involve creating or supporting opportunities for such self-directed and self-evaluated learning (see, in particular, Appendix B). His claim that the most important parts of teaching derive from students’ agency is supported, even more categorically, by Ryan and Deci in their meta-analysis of feedback and grading studies:

...[A] recent meta-analysis confirms that virtually every type of expected tangible reward made contingent on task performance does, in fact, undermine intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, not only tangible rewards, but also threats, deadlines, directives, and competition pressure diminish intrinsic motivation because... people experience them as controllers of their behavior. On the other hand, choice and the opportunity for self-direction appear to enhance intrinsic motivation, as they afford a greater sense of autonomy. . . . Students who are overly controlled not only lose initiative but also learn less well, especially when learning is complex or requires conceptual, creative processing. (2000, 59. Bibliographic

references have been removed from the original for the sake of clarity)

“[T]angible reward[s] made contingent on task performance” are, of course, the core pedagogical and organizational tools of the “traditional” university classroom. “[T]hreats” of poor grades, “deadlines” tied to grade penalties, “directives” in the form of detailed assignments and rubrics, and, “competition pressure” through instruments like the Dean’s List, merit-based scholarships, and professional and graduate-school entrance requirements are, likewise, a constant in most of our students’ lives. While we assume that most faculty are self-motivated, our classrooms are often set up on the assumption that students will work only in response to external rewards.

### Introducing *Lernfreiheit* to my teaching practice

For the last decade, I have been working at finding ways of changing this—of attempting to build greater student autonomy into my classroom to match the autonomy that I consider to be essential in my life as a researcher. I began with the integration of active learning techniques about a decade ago followed by an explicit division between formative and summative evaluation in my grading. I then experimented with blogging, posters, and “the unessay” —an approach to subverting students’ generic expectations about essay writing. Finally, I have been experimenting recently with new approaches to (low-anxiety) grading. Preliminary anecdotal evidence and instruments like course evaluations and RateMyProfessor.com scores suggest that this approach has been successful. In O’Donnell (2014), for example, I was able to report a one-point difference (a 144% improvement) in my average pre- and post-intervention scores on the RateMyProfessor.com scale following the introduction of the unessay (numerous studies suggest that RateMyProfessor scores track student learning, e.g. Otto, Sanford Jr, and Ross 2008; Legg and Wilson 2012, however, show that self-selected RateMyProfessor scorers tend to evaluate teacher performance more negatively than in-class evaluations, even when the same questions are asked in both contexts).

The rest of this paper reviews the techniques I have adopted in attempting to improve this autonomy. In broad terms, these involve three main emphases:

- the communal nature of research and learning;
- the necessity of taking responsibility for one’s own research and learning; and
- reducing the reliance on extrinsic markers of success or failure, in preference for an internal sense of accomplishment.

After describing the different elements involved in this approach, I conclude with a discussion of the way the different pieces interact. As I note there, the overall purpose of these interventions is to create a controlled and supportive model for my students of the scholarly ecosystem I inhabit as a university instructor—a world in which I play a role in deciding what is important, in which I am evaluated in terms of the broad appropriateness and relevance (or not) of my work, and, above all, in which my work derives meaning from the context of the scholarly communities to which I belong.

### Using blogs to promote the communal nature of scholarship

The most important theme to my interventions involves the communal nature of scholarship. Communication of results to others is what turns research into science and scholarship, and the traditional academic freedoms are meaningful only if research is reported: nobody would have forced Galileo to recant if he hadn’t disseminated his work in the first place.

The main tool that I use to establish this sense of community among my students is blogging. The educational potential of blogging has been recognized since the arrival of the first easy-to-use online tools in the late 1990s. Almost two decades later, however, there remains little consensus as to best practice and instructors still find themselves debating core generic questions:

- platform (commercial platforms like WordPress or the blogging modules of a learning management system [LMS] like Moodle?)
- assessment (minimum word counts? required topics?)
- participation (Should a certain number of blogs be required? Should students be required to comment on the work of others?)

My own practice is based on informal surveys and focus-group discussions with several generations of students as well as detailed discussions and experiments conducted with student employees and teaching assistants (TAs). Undergraduate students in these groups and surveys have told me that they prefer to blog behind a firewall, that is, on the University’s LMS. This is in part to avoid confusing their classwork with their personal social-media presence, and, in part, because of an explicit concern about the impact exposing naive or unformed views might have on their online reputations (although my sample is much smaller and the dynamic very different, graduate students seem, in my limited experience, to be more willing to share their work on a public platform and use it in their self-presentation).

My normal practice, therefore, is to use the blogging application in Moodle (the U of L's LMS). Although I have used commercial platforms occasionally in the past, I have never had much success with them with undergraduates: participation falls off rapidly, the blogs that are published tend to be relatively conservative, and students generally show no evidence that they are engaging with others' work. On the LMS, in contrast, most students contribute to the class blog on a weekly basis and show evidence that they have read others' contributions. Indeed, my TA Gurpreet Singh has calculated that students in my classes on average write *in their blogs alone* about twice the number of words required by my department for each class-level: from 4,000-6,000 words in the case of my first-year students through 16,000-20,000 in the case of my fourth years.

*Students use the blog to ask for help, identify problems, share their essay drafts, prepare notes, and organize study groups. By trusting in the good-faith willingness of students to contribute to this virtual classroom and to help each other understand their common research and learning tasks, I have been able to use blogging to create a "community of practice" that very much mirrors the scholarly community I inhabit as a professional academic.*

A second component to the success I have had in maintaining student participation in class blogging is the rubric that I use. In contrast to recommendations found in some studies and instructor manuals (e.g. Krause 2004; Poore 2015), I set no minimum word counts, no commenting or reference requirements, and no required subjects. As I explain to my students in my policies document (and emphasize repeatedly in class), this is because blogs in real life have no such requirements: there are some that are scholarly, some that are thematically organized, some that bounce between the personal and the professional. The main requirement is that the posts in my class represent a "good-faith effort"

to contribute to the discussion, most of the time:

Unless you are given specific instructions in the course, what you write about in your blog is up to you. Sometimes, you may want to write about something you looked up about a book, author, or project. Other times, you might want to discuss things you didn't understand or difficult passages you think you can help others with. It might be about emotional responses you had to something we read, a reflection on things discussed in class or in the hallway, a funny anecdote about something to do with the class, or an interesting and relevant web page or video. Sometimes you may want to write about something else entirely—in a blog, all these things are allowed...

Above all, don't worry too much about topic: if your blogs are consistently off topic or we feel there is some problem with how you are doing it, we will let you know about the problem before we begin penalising you. (O'Donnell 2015)

The remarkable thing about this is that I have great participation and *no* problems with poor effort. In the decade since I first starting using versions of this rubric in my classes, I have had to warn only one student about blogs that my TA and I felt did not represent a good-faith effort. And I have never had to assign a penalty. Not all students contribute every week and a small number participate barely at all. But the majority contribute at least one good-faith blog a week. My better students often end up in detailed exchanges with each other about the class material.

In keeping with the spirit of this approach, I also do not require students to comment on others' posts. This does not mean that students are not engaging with their colleagues: many posts, perhaps a majority, refer in their main body to what others in the class are thinking—noting for example, that the author shares the opinion of others in the class or commenting on trends in others' posts. Since it is actually a little difficult to read other blogs in Moodle (the link to the "compose" page bypasses the place where you read class postings), this means that students are going out of their way to read their classmates' contributions before writing their own (one feature of many modern blogs that is greatly missed in Moodle is a "like" button: interaction would rise considerably, I believe, if students could also quickly vote posts up).

The result of this approach is the creation of a real community within my classes. Students use the blog to ask for help, identify problems, share their essay drafts, prepare notes, and organize study groups. By trusting in the good-faith willingness of students to contribute to this virtual classroom and to help each other understand their common research and learning tasks, I have been able to use blogging to create a "community of practice"

that very much mirrors the scholarly community I inhabit as a professional academic. By sharing with each other, they help define the nature of their study discipline and I acquire a very strong insight into student opinions on and difficulty with class material. I also consciously and frequently refer to blogs during my lectures and class discussion, framing my own contributions as often as I can in terms of issues raised by students in their posts.

## The "unessay": Taking responsibility for research and learning

This emphasis on good-faith effort as the main criteria for determining what counts in blog postings is part of a broader attempt on my part to encourage students to take responsibility for their own research and learning. By leaving questions of form and content in their hands, I encourage students to think about what makes work interesting and important (although I am discussing essay writing here, this approach works, *mutatis mutandis*, with other disciplines; for an example from physics, see Lindsey et al. 2012). A student who cannot define disciplinary excellence, after all, is unlikely to achieve it in practice except by chance. The unessay is an even more radical approach to this problem.

The unessay is a replacement for the traditional "university paper." It requires students to take complete responsibility for the topic, format, and purpose of their assignment. In our introduction to the form in my blog, student research assistants (RAs) Emma Dering, Matt Gal, and I define the unessay as follows:

The "Unessay" is a constructivist approach to teaching the academic essay. Its main premise is that traditional approaches to teaching writing are not effective with contemporary students because they are focussed on getting students to internalise (relatively artificial) formal criteria rather than helping develop as researchers and communicators . . . because they teach "the theme" rather than "the essay."

The "Unessay" addresses this problem by borrowing from the techniques of the Digital Humanities, particularly the "Unconference" and the "Hermeneutics of Screwing Around." Instead of emphasising form over content, the unessay encourages students to experiment with free form writing in the form of exercises and blogs. Instructors then mark what is promising in the students' writing rather than what they get formally wrong. The technique then gradually introduces more the formal aspects of the "undergraduate essay," treating these, however, primarily as an element of genre rather than an essential feature of good writing. Students are encouraged to push at the boundaries of

the form they are taught, producing work that is true both to their own interests and the demands of the writing situation. (O'Donnell, Dering, and Gal 29 August, 2013)

From the teacher's perspective, the exercise is a semester-long program of writing that can be divided into three main parts:

- an initial unessay in which students are invited to “do whatever [they] want” in terms of topic and format;
- a second assignment in which students are given the same instructions as the first, except that they must in this instance “engage with somebody else's ideas”; and
- a third assignment at the end of the semester, in which students are asked to engage with somebody else's ideas in a written format; this submission is then revised and resubmitted by the students after a discussion of traditional essay format.

I use the unessay primarily in first year, where it is intended to address student anxiety about the formal requirements of the “university essay” (for a discussion see Miller 2010). Its point is to teach students to view essay writing as being *about* something, rather than the academic equivalent of “compulsory figures.” Throughout the semester, students are told that the main criteria for success will be “how compelling and effective [they] are.” Exactly what these terms mean, they are told, depends in large part on what they are writing about and the format they choose to disseminate their ideas:

An unessay is compelling when it shows some combination of the following:

- it is as interesting as its topic and approach allows
- it is as complete as its topic and approach allows (it doesn't leave the audience thinking that important points are being skipped over or ignored)
- it is truthful (any questions, evidence, conclusions, or arguments you raise are honestly and accurately presented)

In terms of presentation, an unessay is effective when it shows some combination of these attributes:

- it is readable/watchable/listenable (i.e. the production values are appropriately high and the audience is not distracted by avoidable lapses in presentation)
- it is appropriate (i.e. it uses a format and medium that suits its topic and approach)
- it is attractive (i.e. it is presented in a way

that leads the audience to trust the author and his or her arguments, examples, and conclusions). (O'Donnell 2012)

*And the topics are all student developed: while I used to be criticized regularly in course evaluations for my reluctance to hand out essay topics for “regular” essays, I have yet to receive a single complaint about what is now the complete absence of instructor-composed topics from students assigned the unessay.*

“Compelling” and “effective” are, of course, the way writing (and research) is evaluated in real life. When we submit articles for publication as professional academics, our referees ask themselves whether our arguments are convincing and our presentation shows what we intend it to. And they send it back to us if our work is not both. The “essay” itself, moreover, is, also in real life, an extremely flexible format, without a single set form or set of requirements. By encouraging students to “choose [their] own topic, present it any way [they] please, and [be] evaluated on how compelling and effective [they] are,” I am, in fact, encouraging them to behave like professional academics: matching form to content and thinking how best to report the results of their work to others.

This is not how the traditional “college essay” is taught . . . or thought about by our students. As Rebecca Schuman memorably argues,

Everybody in college hates papers. Students hate writing them so much that they buy, borrow, or steal them instead. Plagiarism is now so commonplace that if we flunked every kid who did it, we'd have a worse attrition rate than a MOOC. And on those rare occasions undergrads do deign to compose their own essays, said exegetic masterpieces usually take them all of half an hour at 4 a.m. to write, and consist accordingly of “arguments” that are at best tangentially related to the coursework, font-manipulated to meet the minimum required page-count. Oh, “attitudes about cultures have changed over time”? I'm so glad you let me know.

Nobody hates writing papers as much as college instructors hate grading papers. Students of the world: You think it wastes

45 minutes of your sexting time to pluck out three quotes from *The Sun Also Rises*, summarize the same four plot points 50 times until you hit Page 5, and then crap out a two-sentence conclusion? It wastes 15 hours of my time to mark up my students' flaccid theses and non sequitur textual “evidence,” not to mention abuse of the comma that should be punishable by some sort of law—all so that you can take a cursory glance at the grade and then chuck the paper forever. (Schuman 2013)

In the case of the unessay, however, we discovered that the lack of rules changed things considerably. For one thing, unessays were, on the whole, mechanically and intellectually superior to work the same students were submitting in other classes (we were able to determine this on the basis of comparative work by my then-TA Jessica Bay, who taught several students in multiple classes that semester; we are in the process of developing a protocol for testing this experimentally). The students who submitted written papers—and most still submit written papers that look somewhat like formal essays—showed none of the mechanical errors Schuman writes about: in four years of unessays, we have found only a handful of run-on sentences, major errors of grammar or punctuation, or even spelling or diction errors—far fewer in all that time, indeed, than would typically show up in a single intake of traditional essays. The topics chosen by the students, likewise, tend to be of a much higher calibre—no more “same four plot points” repeated fifty times or “non-sequitur textual evidence.” And the topics are *all* student developed: while I used to be criticized regularly in course evaluations for my reluctance to hand out essay topics for “regular” essays, I have yet to receive a single complaint about what is now the complete absence of instructor-composed topics from students assigned the unessay.

Marking the unessay, however, as my then-TA Heather Hobma and I discovered when the first batch came in, required a significant change in practice on our part. A good deal of traditional university essay grading, we discovered, involves identifying things that students have *not* done that we wished they had—“incorrect” citation formats, “incorrectly”-placed thesis statements, “incorrect” diction, and so on. As much as we may wish to teach students to write well, what we often actually end up doing with traditional essay grading is focusing instead on teaching them not to write poorly: identifying how far students have deviated (in often largely mechanical ways) from our stated or unstated norms. The result is that students begin to write extremely conservatively: since we are focusing on their “mistakes,” they in turn make mistake-avoidance their primary focus—a deadening approach to any intellectual work, theirs or ours.

The unessay, however, forced us to concentrate

on the students' goals and ideas: since there were no extrinsic norms, we were forced to grade them on the basis of how good their material was and how well it was supported by the form they chose. This did not mean that we had to accept things uncritically—students can make technically or intellectually poor videos, short stories, or non-fiction prose pieces as easily as they can poor essays (though in practice, unessays are generally higher quality in terms of their “production values” than a typical batch of essays). But it did force us, as it clearly had the students themselves, to consider why they were presenting the work the way they were. Because the ultimate goal of the assignment is to bring students to the point where they were comfortable with the essay form as a vehicle for their own thoughts (the final part of the assignment teaches them to edit their writing into essay form), we used our comments to identify aspects of their work that they could use in some future essay—a focus on what students could do well in the future (rather than what they have done poorly in the past) that had until this point never been part of my normal grading practice. To see their essay writing as a formative exercise designed to improve their skills and knowledge (much the way our research functions in our careers), rather than a summative exercise determining how well or poorly they have learned what we taught them.

## Grading

The final component of my approach to encouraging student agency involves grading. When an assignment comes with instructions that insist that there is no “right” way of doing things, comparative grading seems an especially unsatisfactory form of assessment. This is not because it is impossible to distinguish between excellent, good, or poor work. Rather, it is because grades intrinsically discourage the kind of intellectual risk taking and willingness to experiment that the exercises are designed to encourage. As a vast amount of research has demonstrated, grades are understood by students as a summative and extrinsic reward/punishment system rather than a formative prompt to curiosity-driven work (see Kohn 1999 for the classic discussion). The response, even among many good students, is therefore to engage in intellectually counterproductive behaviour: hiding weaknesses and avoiding mistakes, underperforming and avoiding challenge, masking genuine interests in the hopes of presenting ideas they believe may be more in line with “what the instructor wants” (there is a huge literature on this; for a classic discussion, see Butler and Nisan 1986).

These are not qualities we value in our own work and we should not encourage them in our students. Changing this behaviour in the classroom, however, required (for me at least) a completely different approach to

grading. For the last decade, I have made a distinction between summative and formative assignments—summative assignments are those where students receive a letter or percentage grade that counts toward their final grade in the class; formative assignments are those that either do not count toward the final grade or that are graded on a pass/fail basis, depending on whether the assignment was completed satisfactorily. Over time, the relative number of summative assignments in my syllabi have fallen, while the number and variety of formative assignments have gone up: by the 2013-14 academic year, a typical course might split approximately 50:50 between formative (pass/fail) and summative (A to F) grades.

In the last two years, I have added “badges” to this mix. Now a typical course will consist of approximately 40% to 45% “pass/fail” or “appropriate/inappropriate” assignments and another 40% to 45% (normally consisting of a final paper and/or exam) graded on an A to F scale. The remaining 10% to 20% is devoted to badges that students can earn for doing excellent work on any assignment during the semester: usually 1.5% badges for work of “distinction” and 3% for work of “great distinction.” These badges are worth the same regardless of the weight of the underlying exercise: a “distinction” badge on a quiz worth 5% provides the same benefit to the student as does a “distinction” badge on an essay worth 20%. As I make clear to students, these badges are also extremely difficult to earn: in the two years I have been using this system, very few students have received them and no student has earned more than about 10-12% in this way.

The big difference between this system and the more traditional system I previously followed has to do with the role of “term work”—that is, the various essays, quizzes and tests, and assignments I give throughout the semester. In my previous system the main distinction between summative and formative work was how “big” it was. “Formative” grades were saved for small, low-value activities like participation, blog postings, and quizzes; “summative” grades applied to most things that required significant effort—essays, mid-term and final exams, major tests.

Now, however, I classify work by function rather than weight: term work is where students learn and practice new skills—it is therefore now graded almost entirely on a formative basis, regardless of difficulty or size; summative grades, on the other hand, are reserved for milestones—places where you show what you have learned from the term work: mid-term exams (in some cases) and, generally, final papers and exams (see, for example, the evaluation section in O'Donnell 2016).

This means that students receive a “pass” or “appropriate” for all or most pieces of work they submit in the term, regardless of size, provided

it meets my minimum standard (approximately a C; work falling below this receives either the lower grade it earned or can be resubmitted). But I also grade this work qualitatively (i.e. with comments and a letter grade) whenever possible, even though this score does not count against the students' final grade. This provides students with, on the one hand, the freedom to experiment intellectually and risk making the mistakes that research suggests is essential for successful learning (see Hattie 2008 *passim*); but it also provides real-world feedback about how the students are doing and how their work would calibrate on a standard grade scale, comforting those who have been conditioned by years of schooling to understand their progress through marks (Bower 2010; Butler and Nisan 1986). It also, moreover, mirrors how professional academics are (on the whole) evaluated by our peers: having an article accepted for a journal involves being judged on a fail/pass/distinction system in which most work also receives comments from editors and referees and in which “failed” work can be (and usually is) resubmitted to the same or a different journal.

The approach has been extremely well received in my student evaluations. In particular, they especially appreciate the certainty it provides for the term work they hand in (because students vary relatively normally in terms of how much they do hand in, the grades for term work show a reasonable spread). I like it because it also encourages them to use grades diagnostically: students no longer come to my door to ask, “Why didn't I get a B?”; they come to ask how they could get a B on a similar piece of work next time. Because I reserve between 10% and 20% for (very hard to get) badges, moreover, this new marking scheme accomplishes this without (thus far) inflating my grades: a comparison of the distribution in sections of courses graded using this system against my average in the same courses over the previous twenty years suggests, if anything, that grades under this new system are slightly lower, although the experimental sample size is still too small to claim this with certainty. And finally, the system is very freeing for the grader: for most of the students' term work, I can grade and comment on student work realistically without worrying about how poor grades or (constructively) critical comments will be received by somebody whose only focus is on their GPA.

## Conclusion

Professional academics enjoy a great degree of professional autonomy. Although there are always some limits, we decide, on the whole, what is worth teaching and researching. Indeed, we consider this ability to set our own agendas and follow our own (collective) interests a crucial safeguard for the quality of our research: we resist attempts to establish top-down research agendas and we jealously guard our right to

teach and write things without regard for what those above us in the administrative hierarchy may prefer.

Given the degree to which we believe academic freedom is central to our own teaching and research practice, the extent to which traditional approaches to university instruction restrict student autonomy is very surprising. This is the more so because the student right of *Lernfreiheit*, or the right to determine the course of their study, was originally considered one of *three* crucial academic freedoms by the theorists who established *our* rights to research and teach.

In the last ten years, I have been working with my TAs and RAs at reconstructing this right for the students in my classes, focusing on three main qualities: building a sense of community, encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning, and emphasizing intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic, task-contingent rewards. Although my results are at this point still preliminary and largely anecdotal, the evidence I have suggests that all three qualities contribute to improved learning outcomes and greater satisfaction on the part of my students.

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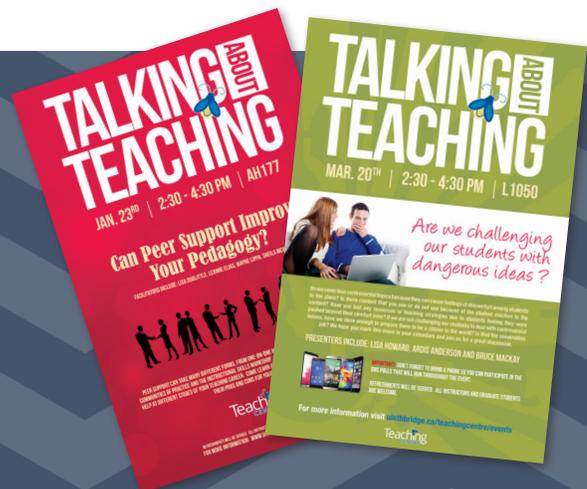
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# TALKING ABOUT TEACHING

Talking About Teaching is a discussion-rich session that covers different aspects of teaching in higher education often related to current issues in the field. All instructors and graduate students are welcome to attend and are encouraged to ask questions and participate in discussion with the panel members. Past topics have included: Can Peer Support Help Your Pedagogy? as well as Are We Challenging Our Students with Dangerous Ideas?



Join us again this semester for hot topics, engaging panels, and some fantastic conversation.

For more information about these events and how to participate, please visit: [www.uleth.ca/teachingcentre/talking-about-teaching](http://www.uleth.ca/teachingcentre/talking-about-teaching)



## A LIGHT-HEARTED LOOK AT A FEMALE TEACHING CAREER

by Shelly Wismath

*Shelly is a professor in the Department of Liberal Education, and is a former Board of Governors Teaching Chair.*

I taught my first course at the University of Lethbridge in 1983, as a lecturer, fresh from finishing my master's degree in mathematics. Like many new instructors, I had little idea about realistic pacing of material: in my first semester teaching Intro Calculus, I got through twice as much content as I ever have since. Naively, I thought that if you told students something once, and wrote it on the board for them to copy into their notes, they would both understand and learn it! Besides pacing, one of my big challenges at that stage was how to develop authority as a teacher. I was not much older than my students, and looked younger than my age, so I was frequently mistaken for a student (or a secretary – but that's another story). Mathematics itself helped me with that, as so many students were scared of it and willing to respect anyone who could do it. I was often warned by colleagues that I was “too soft,” and I struggled with what level of professional distance I needed to maintain, and how to balance being a small, smiling, and friendly female person with being the final authority in grades.

I finished my PhD in 1988 and obtained a tenure-track position in 1989, still struggling with issues of feminist pedagogy and authority in the classroom. In April of 1989 I had a child. I myself had never had a woman mathematics prof, although I had met one, and I knew only one other academic woman who had a child. My students were barely used to having a woman prof, let alone a pregnant one. In the Spring 1989 semester, they were visibly anxious that I would go into labour and disappear before the end of semester. Although it's very much an over-generalization, my view then was that women academics in the generation before me had cats; many women of my generation had one child; and eventually I knew women who had two children. I look at some of my young colleagues now who have several children and am amazed that they do so well in balancing everything!

When my daughter was about one and a half, I knew a student in my 3000-level Mathematical Logic course who also had a daughter the same age. From her I discovered that another student in the class had a young child, too. There were eight female students in that class (out of a total of 25), and encouraging more women in math was an interest of mine and others in those days (and still is!). So I decided that I would invite the eight female students to coffee one Friday afternoon. To my surprise, I found that seven of them had children! One was a single parent with no support or relatives in Lethbridge, whose semester fell apart when her child got sick; one was an “older” married student (probably mid-30s) who had her third child right after mid-term week, missed one week of classes and still got an A in the course; some had spouses and support, some didn't, but all struggled with combining school work and parenthood.

This experience really opened my eyes to the reality of student lives. I no longer assumed that their lives were like my student days had been, when everyone was between 18 and 22, living on or close to campus, and being a student was a full-time occupation. Up to then I had been very rigid with deadlines: no extensions, no late penalties, get things in exactly on time or get zero. But as my own schedule became vulnerable to unforeseen crises around illness and child care, and I realized how many of my students had lives more complicated than mine, I became much more willing to cut people some slack, to find out what was going on in students' lives and make allowances as needed.

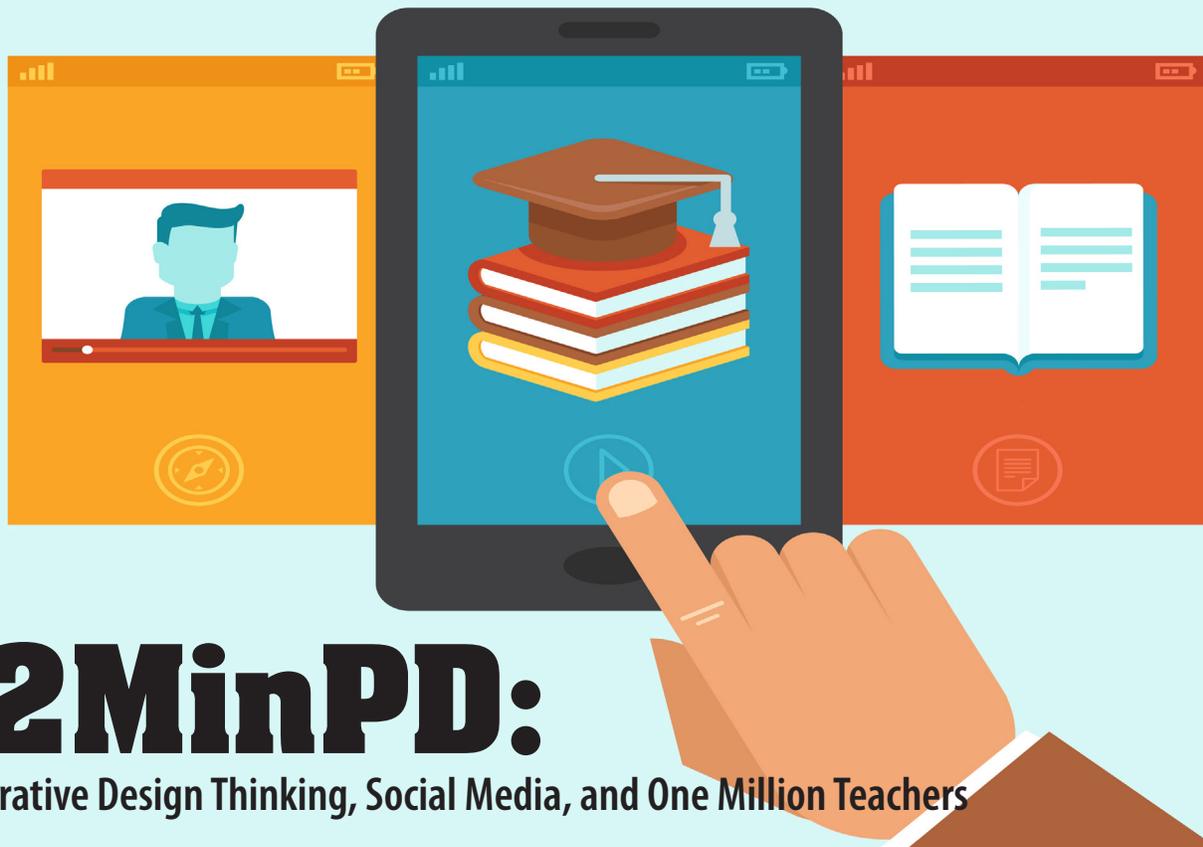
Time flew by, as it always does, and there came a point when I realized that my students thought of me as motherly. I didn't feel old enough then to be the mother of an 18-year old student, but that didn't seem to matter. In fact there's a huge literature about how students treat female faculty members differently than males; in particular, women who are warm and motherly and nurturing are seen as sympathetic and good teachers, while men are praised more for being the authoritarian father figures. I saw some of this in the way my students treated me, and their

expectations of me, especially in the courses I co-taught with male instructors. In the typical “mother and father” pairing of instructors, students expected nurturing and support from me and intellectual rigour and challenge from my male colleague. Yet another balancing act to manage and work with and around: how to build a supportive environment that still provides intellectual challenge.

Of course, every year the students are still 18 and I am one year older. There came a stage where I really was old enough to be their mother, and the year my daughter went off to university brought another realization. I expected my daughter, as the child of two professors, to know completely how the university system works, but in fact she did a lot of those standard dumb “first-year” things that bug us all. It reminded me, so long after my own first-year university experience, just how big and scary and exciting that transition is for students, and that we as professors need to clarify our expectations of them and provide them support as they start new lives.

The stage that prompted this article is a new one that has recently snuck up on me. Everyone in my family goes grey early in their thirties, and I was no exception. For many years I coloured my hair, as close to my natural colour as I could remember. But four years ago, I decided the time had come to see what my natural grey looked like. I didn't think I looked, or felt or acted or taught, much older, but students do seem to see me differently. This was immediately reflected in my course evaluations: every semester since the change, I get comments like “She is the just the *sweetest* lady” or “seriously the sweetest person ever.” Apparently, I have passed the “mother stage” and moved on to the “grandmother stage.” I don't have any grandchildren, let alone grandchildren old enough to be in university, but that doesn't seem to matter. I'd like to think I'm a wise crone, but it appears that to my students I am now a white-haired sweet little old lady, everyone's grandmother!

This doesn't mean that I have come full circle, back to being seen as “soft” again. It's interesting to me to look back and see how the themes and issues I reflect on in my teaching now present in my earliest years here: how to teach process while still including content, how to get students to engage in the process of learning, and how to balance using my authority as a teacher with interacting with students as equal partners in their own learning. Over the years I've come to view my role as less about teaching, or conveying content, and more about facilitating learning, and to understand how critical engagement with students and their learning is in doing that. In fact I believe that students readily accept my authority as a teacher, when they know that I care deeply not only about my subject area but also about their learning.



# #2MinPD:

## Collaborative Design Thinking, Social Media, and One Million Teachers

by Chris Mattatall

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### An Idea is Born: #2MinPD and Design Thinking

One evening while watching 60 Minutes on CBS, I listened to an interview with David Kelly from the Institute of Design at Stanford University. The topic of the interview was focused upon an innovative program at Stanford known as “d.school” (that is, design school: see <http://dschool.stanford.edu>). The d.school approach is about creating solutions through collaborative design thinking. Design thinking, as defined on the d.school website, is “a methodology for innovation that combines creative and analytical approaches, and requires collaboration across disciplines.” Practitioners address challenges collaboratively through an iterative process of solution prototypes that get tested in real-world situations, followed by a cycle of reflection, revision, redesign, and reapplication. Each cycle is believed to bring stronger insights and potentially better solutions to the challenges teams seek to address.

What’s more is that d.school even has a design lab specific to my interests, teaching, and research here at the University of Lethbridge, that being K-12 education. The K12 Lab helps to inspire and develop the creative confidence

of educators to help explore new models for teaching and learning. It helps teachers and school leaders take their ideas and insights and move them into action within their classrooms through design thinking and collaborative problem solving. Additionally, design thinking is applied to school-based issues and school-reform efforts in order to create site-based solutions to challenges that exist in situ.

Now, it is very important to stop here for a moment and emphasize that the word “challenge” is not meant to suggest a situation or environment that is only negative or undesirable. Teachers in today’s schools are confronted with many interesting situations that require innovative thinking and solution generation. For example, creating new and exciting ways to engage learners who are intellectually gifted, or figuring out new and effective ways to teach writing to students new to Canada, or finally, to figure out more inclusive designs on school-wide fitness programs, are just a few such challenges schools face. The possibilities for design thinking are endless. Teachers are always on the lookout for new ideas to help them motivate, engage, challenge, and enrich the learning experiences of their students. One only has to look at popular websites such as Pinterest or TeachersPayTeachers to see how frequently teachers share and borrow good ideas from those who are willing to share them. The underlying assumption, of course, which has been hotly contested in education circles for decades, is that teachers are capable and qualified to enhance their own profession from

within. Or put another way, teachers do not need to wait for empirically generated findings from university researchers before addressing the challenges they face every day in schools; they can proactively design or seek out solutions to use within their own schools.

Tapping into this desire among educators to find and share and even create good ideas for the teaching profession, d.school fellow Melissa Pelochino created a social-media sharing platform for teachers called #2MinPD (Two-Minute Professional Development). The concept involves the mass distribution of two-minute videos that promote great ideas from and for teachers. Once a teacher has created a video, he or she will send it to d.school where it goes through a peer-review process. The vetting process helps to eliminate repetitive ideas, ensures content is appropriate and meets time and quality standards, is clear, understandable, and not plagiarized from another source. Once the video has been accepted by d.school it is pushed out through Twitter or YouTube to teachers’ smartphones or laptops. The distribution network consists of teachers all over the United States and Canada and currently lists about one million members. Teachers receive the #2MinPD videos into their Twitter or YouTube accounts and can watch them at their leisure.

### Context for Assignment Implementation

In my own course, The Educational Psychology of Exceptional Learners, we frequently talk

about and explore learning challenges that students have. We look at what research suggests should be done to address many learning challenges you would find in any school today. We utilize case-study analysis and discussion to come as close as we can to school-based design thinking. We do not wait until our BEd students enter their future schools before they begin to examine and address real school-based teaching challenges that they will someday face. We have our students work on these problems now, helping them to think about and work collaboratively to address these real problems. The University of Lethbridge leads the country in the number of weeks of school-based practicum (27 weeks compared to 14 weeks that many have) and since we do this in three separated stages within the full education program, we have many opportunities to debrief and discuss actual teaching scenarios that students faced in their practicums and how they handled them. Our students see and hear and learn a lot while they work with teachers and students in their practicums, and the knowledge they have acquired helps them to think about their own teaching. Often students return to our classes from their practicums with many questions about how to address specific challenges they faced in their teaching and in their classrooms. This is a time when our students seem most amenable to learning all they can about how to teach and reach all students within their classrooms.

One of the potential pitfalls of having students return from their school practicums eager and willing to get any help they can about how to teach more effectively is that we are sometimes tempted to simply tell our students how they might address certain challenges without having them learn how to find solutions on their own. Taking the time to lead students through a process of researching and then applying empirically-informed teaching and learning approaches is important.

### **Application of the #2MinPD Concept as a Course Assignment**

In the Spring of 2016 I decided to implement the #2MinPD concept in my classroom as one of my course assignments. The idea seemed fresh and exciting and I thought it might be a way to lead to engagement and application of research-informed teaching. Using the #2MinPD concept as a course assignment is based on the theory that students not only learn by doing, but they learn by doing important and meaningful work that matters to their entire field. By creating products or content for immediate dissemination, students put greater effort and thought into their work. The collaborative research, design, and development process, not the product, is the most important component of the assignment. In fact, the question that framed the entire assignment for me was, “What if the work

behind the creation of the video itself produced the greater learning experience?” Think of all of the research, planning, and development that goes into creating such a video. Students work in small teams of three or four, receive a difficult classroom problem to solve, and then set to work to: (1) understand the nature of the problem from an educational psychology point of view, (2) find potential solutions to the problem based on empirical research that is already published in research journals, (3) craft a new strategy that classroom teachers can implement in their classrooms, and (4) demonstrate the strategy in a two-minute video. Now, it is important to stress that we do not promote #2MinPDs as a quick and easy solution to difficult and complex learning and teaching challenges. The goal of the #2MinPD project is to demonstrate and make teachers aware of a new or creative approach or application of findings already promoted in research. For example, many teachers use graphic organizers or some form of mnemonic to help students remember content or process. Do classroom teachers know all there is to know about such techniques? Likely not. Could teachers benefit from current research findings that are then presented in a creative, interesting, and informative way that takes only two minutes of their time to learn about? Absolutely!

The major objectives and desired outcomes of the #2MinPD assignment that I gave to my students were:

Students will learn a great deal about educational psychology by addressing real school problems in collaborative solution-oriented teams. They will do this by back-searching the educational psychology underlying the challenges (i.e., attention problems) and then locate what current research suggests teachers might need to know about the condition/problem and how teachers could help these students.

1. Students will get used to the idea that with the help of their colleagues they can find and develop empirically-informed solutions to real school-based problems. We want them to trust the solutions they generate and develop, provided they are founded on empirical research.
2. Students will develop and be able to clearly articulate a teaching solution. This is important because it mirrors what we expect them to be able to do during their entire careers. This takes time, several edits, and a process of refinement.... This is an important skill to get used to in developing good teaching pedagogy.
3. Students will see themselves as leaders in the field, contributors, and solution-builders. We hope to instill this in them by requiring that they design their solutions for audiences (teachers) who will view and critique their work.

## **Conclusion**

By using #2MinPD for one of my course assignments, I was not really concerned about whether or not the videos were mass distributed to the one million teachers. We had 15 design-thinking teams, 15 videos produced by the end of the course, but none of them passed through the peer-reviewed process to mass distribution. Was the assignment a failure? No, not at all! The real success and benefit of this assignment was that the process itself (research, design, edit, review, and vetting process) was a far more valuable teaching tool than the end product. Students had to engage in an iterative process that involved knowing their course material well enough to teach it to others. As one student put it, “it was a great consolidating activity that I found both fun and educational...and a good opportunity for us to get involved in the professional community.” Another student summed it up this way: “It offers a creative and insightful way of summarizing important information.”

However, the assignment was not entirely successful either, and correspondence with Melissa Pelochino helped to address some of the project’s shortcomings. Clearly understanding our audience and using this as another layer in our design process seems to be one of our biggest needs moving forward. Some of our videos were directed to a general teaching audience and this produced vague concepts, ideas, and strategies. Another suggestion was to not always think of creating new strategies for teachers, but to consider teaching important learning concepts from research and distilling them down into a #2MinPD. The idea here is that even if teachers do not have time to read new research on their own, they might benefit from someone else’s efforts of summarizing important concepts in a short two-minute video. This process would undoubtedly also be a tremendous benefit to the pre-service teachers taking my course.

Developing and disseminating the #2MinPD video concept can be used by many faculties (Arts & Science, Education, Fine Arts, Health Sciences, and Management) as an effective teaching and learning medium. Similar to the 3-Minute Thesis competition that you see on many university campuses, #2MinPD could provide an avenue for the teaching community at the U of L for evaluation, project creation, and interest. When students know that others are viewing their work—and their name is attached to this very public display—they work harder to get it right, the content is better, and students remember the work longer.

# Investigating Response Rates

## AND BIAS IN ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS

By Tom Perks

*Tom Perks is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology in the Faculty of Arts and Science. Tom is also a former Teaching Centre Fellow.*

*In this article I investigate some of the strategies that I have used over the years to increase the number of students who respond to my online course evaluations and, relatedly, whether higher rates of response change the substance of the feedback I receive.*

I must admit, as a university teacher, I've always had a love-hate relationship with course evaluations. On the one hand, the favourable comments instill me with a sense of pride in what I do in the classroom and help reinforce

that sometimes elusive indication that I'm getting it right as a teacher. On the other hand, unfavourable comments make me doubt what I do and, despite my best intentions, often take on disproportionate significance in convincing me I'm doing it wrong. Of course, these back-and-forth reflections on my pedagogical practices, which course evaluations provide a central platform for, are important to my development as a teacher. In fact, many of my classroom practices – such as leading in-class discussions, using alternative pedagogies, assessing student work, and even my occasional attempts at humour – have been heavily influenced by the feedback, both positive and negative, that I have received from course evaluations. But the purpose and usefulness of course evaluations are premised on the assumptions that they offer representative, unbiased, and thus accurate accounts of student experiences and perceptions in a particular course. Low response rates to

course evaluations, and especially online course evaluations, which is the focus of this article, are a potential threat to this accuracy.

I recall that the topic of response rates to course evaluations was a particular topic of conversation in my department in the fall of 2006. This was a time when we began discussing as a department the possibility of shifting from using in-class course evaluations to course evaluations completed online. At the time, one of the more prominent concerns that was raised was the concern over a decline in response rates. It seems that a number of us were apprehensive of the shift in part because we knew that the response rates to online evaluations were typically lower than their in-class counterparts, meaning that the feedback one gets from online evaluations compared to in-class tends to be less representative and therefore potentially biased. Given the usefulness of course evaluations to both course design and teaching development,

as well as the relative weight that course evaluations have in terms of career progress, such concerns around representativeness and accuracy among faculty were understandable. But despite this and a handful of other concerns, the administrative and economic efficiency of moving to online evaluations simply made too much sense, and while the ease of transition was relative rather than absolute, I and the majority of my department colleagues began using online course evaluations beginning in 2007, and we exclusively use them in our department today. However, at least for me, the issues of response rates, representativeness, and bias in online course evaluations remain of interest.

Based on my own course evaluations, after the transition to online evaluations, my response rates did indeed drop. Comparing the year before and the year after I moved to online evaluations, the number of students across all of my courses who completed an evaluation fell from 80% in 2006 to 63% in 2007. But these before and after averages are based on response rates across different courses, so for the purpose of comparison I will focus on Introduction to Sociology, a course that I have taught regularly for over 10 years and that is the largest course our department offers, with anywhere between 120 and 300 enrolled students in any given class. The benefit of comparing response rates for classes of this size is that it helps reduce some of the year-to-year selection bias that may exist in smaller classes. If I again compare response rates to the evaluations in the year prior to the shift to online evaluations to the response rates in the year following the shift, but now only for Introduction to Sociology, the drop is much larger, from 81% to 53%. At the time, given that this was my first attempt at online evaluations, I put in a concerted effort to ensure that the response rates to the online evaluations remained consistent with the in-class evaluations done in the previous year. For example, on the day the online evaluations opened and were accessible to students, I emphasized to students during class time how useful their feedback is to me as a teacher and to my efforts to improve the course in subsequent years (these particular online evaluations were accessible for a three-day period during the third last week of the Spring 2007 term). In addition, I emphasized my hope that everyone enrolled in the course would complete an evaluation and my sincere appreciation to those who completed one. And in case these in-class announcements didn't reach everyone, I also sent out reminder e-mails to the class in the mornings of the second and final day the evaluations were available to briefly remind students of the importance of responding. Also included in these e-mails were the response rates up to that point, provided to me by my department's administrative assistant, to give students a sense of where their overall participation stood in the hopes that this information would entice the students who had

yet to complete an evaluation to do so. These strategies were in addition to the automatic e-mails sent to students from the Faculty of Arts and Science requesting that they complete an online evaluation for this course. And yet, despite my best efforts, I was admittedly disappointed that almost half of the students chose not to fill out an online evaluation.

I have continued using these same strategies in all of my courses since my initial transition to online evaluations (with the only exception being that the length of time my online evaluations are open has gradually increased in length, from three days, to one week, and now to the two final weeks of a term), with slightly varying levels of success. For instance, across the six subsequent times I have taught Introduction to Sociology (from 2008 to 2014), the response rates to the online evaluations were 49%, 55%, 59%, 67%, 56%, and 64%, respectively. Given this relatively stable pattern, I have reluctantly conceded that a response rate to online evaluations in the 55-65% range is all that I should expect in a class of this size, given the particular strategies I employ to encourage student completion.

Still, I felt that my response rates could be improved. So prior to the Fall 2015 term I decided that I wanted to attempt to do just this. Would, for example, a grade-based incentive to respond increase rates of completion? If so, by how much? And relatedly, would a higher response rate change the type of feedback I received? In other words, does the size of the sample matter? To answer these questions, in addition to the strategies I had used in previous years to increase response rates, I offered students in my Introduction to Sociology class in the Fall 2015 term a 0.5% bonus to their final grade if they completed an online evaluation. A few caveats about this bonus are necessary. First, since course evaluations are anonymous, I did not know who did and who did not complete an evaluation. To address this, *everyone in the class received the bonus* regardless of whether they filled an online evaluation out or not (although the students did not know this). And second, given that student grades in this course are based solely on multiple-choice Moodle exams – where exam questions are pulled randomly from a pool of questions, such that, while similar in difficulty, no two exams are identical – I feel that this 0.5% bonus, which is equivalent to “rounding up” to a higher letter grade, is a reasonable concession given the small variability that can occur when assigning grades based on this method of assessment, and so this has been a practice that I have used in this particular course in previous years. So with these caveats in mind, with the promise of a bonus the response rate to the online evaluations increased to 89%. This notable increase of 20-30% in the rate of response compared to previous online evaluations is clearly suggestive of the usefulness of a grade-based incentive for improving

response rates, and even the usefulness of a relatively marginal incentive of an additional 0.5% to a student's final grade.

In addition to trying to improve students' rates of response to online evaluations, I was also curious what would happen if I did nothing to encourage students to respond. After all, I had endeavoured to increase response rates with a certain degree of blind faith that the strategies I had been using over the years have a significant positive effect on response rates, and that my response rates would otherwise be lower if I didn't employ these strategies. It may be the case, however, that I would receive comparable rates of response to my online evaluations if I relied solely on the notification e-mails sent out automatically from the Faculty of Arts and Science once online evaluations become accessible. So in the Spring 2016 term, again in Introduction to Sociology, to explore this possibility I employed none of the strategies I had used in previous years (notably all students still received the 0.5% bonus). The response rate, this time, was 33%. Table 1 summarizes the response rates associated with each strategic approach. These results are again clearly suggestive that emphasizing the usefulness of student feedback, stressing one's appreciation for that feedback, and sending out multiple reminder e-mails together are effective strategies for increasing response rates.

**Table 1 - Response rates associated with different strategies to encourage completion of online course evaluations across different course offerings of Introduction to Sociology**

Automatic notification e-mails only	33%
Automatic notification e-mails, emphasize the importance of feedback, stress appreciation for feedback, and send out reminder e-mails	58%
Automatic notification e-mails, emphasize the importance of feedback, stress appreciation for feedback, send out reminder e-mails, and offer a grade-based incentive of 0.5%	89%

*\*Percentage based on the total number of students who responded to the online evaluations from 2007 to 2014 divided by the total number of enrolled students during this same time period*

My discussion so far has focused on increasing response rates to online evaluations. But response rates, and whether they are high or low, in and of themselves, may not necessarily be problematic. What is problematic is when those who choose not to respond to an online evaluation, who I will refer to as missing, are somehow different from those who do. In other words, if accurate evaluations is the underlying goal, then the primary concern should be *representativeness*. If those who choose to

respond, and the feedback they provide, is similar to those who are missing (or otherwise would be similar had those who are missing chosen to respond), then the feedback from the online evaluations is representative and thus provides an accurate snapshot of the experiences of the students in the course. In such cases, a low or high rate of response is of little consequence. Conversely, if those who are missing are missing systematically – for example, perhaps those students who generally dislike a course are more likely to respond to an online evaluation than those who generally like it – a low response rate is of consequence since it would exacerbate the bias this systematic missingness introduces, whereas a high response rate would help alleviate it. But, as I asked earlier, does the size of the sample matter?

Given that response rates to online course evaluations are often far from perfect, it's typical for one to never know if those who respond are representative. But a comparison of the online evaluations across the different times I have taught Introduction to Sociology allows me to speak to the issue of representativeness to some extent, albeit with a certain number of methodological assumptions being made, the most important being the assumption that the experiences of students enrolled in the course across the years being compared were similar (which, in terms of course design, content, assessment, and style of delivery, they generally were). To keep the calculations manageable, I will only compare numeric scores and written feedback from my most recent Introduction to Sociology online evaluations in 2015 and 2016, with response rates of 89% and 33%, respectively. Here I am interested in whether the feedback I received in a year when the response rate was low is quantitatively or qualitatively different from the feedback I received when the response rate was high, since the latter is likely to be representative. In other words, is there evidence of bias in online evaluations when response rates are low?

To address this question, I first tested for significant differences across years in the responses to the multiple-choice question items included in the online course evaluations (the same questions were asked in 2015 and 2016 and are listed in Table 2). For each question, students chose from four response options: "poor," "unsatisfactory," "good," and "excellent." Since these are ordinal measures, meaning that the responses are ordered from low to high but that the distances between the responses lack meaning, I conducted a Mann-Whitney U test on each question item. The Mann-Whitney U test tests whether scores on an ordinal measure are the same for two groups, or in this case whether students in Spring 2016, when the response rate was low, responded similarly to each question item compared to those in Fall 2015, when the response rate was high. The test does this by calculating and comparing mean

<b>Table 2 - Mean ranks on responses to multiple-choice items from Introduction to Sociology online course evaluations in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016</b>		
	Fall 2015 (N=244) <sup>a</sup>	Spring 2016 (N=45) <sup>b</sup>
The course planning and material organization was...	145.6	157.9
The textbooks and other learning materials were...	145.9	152.8
The instructor's punctuality was...	146.1	145.3
The instructor's availability to students, including office hours or by appointment, was...	146.8	141.8
The instructor's explanation of grading criteria was...	146.0	142.6
The instructor's delivery and explanation of ideas and concepts were...	146.4	150.6
The instructor's encouragement of students' questions, discussions, and critical thinking was...	146.0	149.3
The instructor's provision of timely and useful feedback on students' work was...	148.3	134.1
The fairness of the assessments (exams and/or assignments) of material covered was...	148.9	133.5
The instructor's effort to make the course as interesting as possible was...	146.4	150.0
The instructor's effort to make the course as challenging as possible was...	143.0	165.1
The instructor's treatment of students with respect and without prejudice was...	145.7	150.9
The instructor overall was...	147.0	147.3
The course overall was...	146.9	154.1

*a - Represents the smallest number of valid cases across question items*  
*b - All mean rank differences were non-significant at  $p \leq .05$  (determined using Mann-Whitney U test).*  
*c - Response options were "poor," "unsatisfactory," "good," and "excellent" for all questions.*

ranks, or summary averages of the distribution of responses for each group, where statistically significant (i.e., larger) differences in the mean ranks are suggestive that the two groups differ systematically in their responses. The test results reported in Table 2, comparing the mean ranks, show no significant differences in responses to any of the question items across years. In other words, there does not appear to be any systematic tendency for responses to any of the question items to be lower or higher when the response rate was low.

<b>Table 3 - Percentage breakdown of written feedback from Introduction to Sociology online course evaluations in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016</b>		
	Fall 2015 (N=164)	Spring 2016 (N=33)
Positive feedback only	72%	70%
Both positive and critical feedback	22%	24%
Critical feedback only	6%	6%

In addition to comparing the numeric feedback from the online evaluations, I also compared the written feedback, in which students were asked to "Please comment constructively regarding this course and/or the instructor." To do so, I broke down the written feedback I received from each student in 2015 and 2016, albeit rather crudely, into three categories: feedback that was positive only, feedback that was both positive and critical, and feedback that was critical only. In Table 3, the number of students who provided feedback that fell into each of these categories is presented as a percentage of the total number of students who provided written feedback. As the table shows, the percentage breakdown of the written feedback is quite consistent across years. As such, again, there is little evidence of any systematic bias to the written comments from the online evaluations with a low rate of response.

In summary, this article reported on my transition to online course evaluations and my efforts at the time, as well as my ongoing efforts to sustain and possibly even improve the response rates to the online course evaluations in my large-enrollment, first-year Introduction to Sociology class. On the one hand, my findings provide insight into the effectiveness of the various strategies I have previously employed to boost response rates, including emphasizing the importance of completing an evaluation, stressing my appreciation to those who completed one, sending out reminder e-mails, and, most recently, offering a grade-based incentive for completion. On the other hand, my findings temper the need for response rates to be increased at all, as they offer evidence

of a lack of systematic bias in online course evaluations with comparatively low rates of response. This is likely to be reassuring to those hoping to make use of their course evaluations when response rates are low, whether it be for teaching development or career progress, since it suggests that high response rates are not a necessary prerequisite for accurate evaluations. At the same time, my finding of a lack of systematic bias must also be tempered by the fact that as response rates continue to decline, the likelihood of systematic bias increases. In the present case, a “low” response rate of 33%, given the size of the class, still meant that over 40 students responded to the online course evaluation. And although the feedback that these 40 students gave appeared to be representative, and thus apparently accurate, what if only 30 students had responded? Would systematic bias had been present then? Or 20? More generally, is there a minimum number of students required to respond to ensure accurate evaluations? As well, what about smaller class sizes? Is a response rate in the 30% range sufficient? In the absence of definitive answers to these questions, and given the nature of sampling theory, it is impossible to answer these questions definitively; a high response rate, although perhaps not necessarily crucial, is at least preferred.

But are there other explanations why there was so little variation in student feedback across years despite significant differences in the number of students who completed the evaluations, aside from assuming there was a lack of bias? One relevant consideration is the nature of the questions themselves, and especially the single qualitative question asking students to “Please comment constructively regarding this course and/or the instructor.” While the feedback from this question relative to the multiple-choice questions is more useful for teaching development since it provides students the freedom to constructively reflect on the course, it is clear that this question (which, for comparative reasons, is identical to what most instructors in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences use) is far removed from the course’s specific content and structure, perhaps resulting in routine responses from students that tend to be consistent across years. In contrast, questions tied more closely to the actual workings of the course may exhibit more variation. We should also remember that most students are asked to complete multiple course evaluations every term (again, often with the exact same questions), which perhaps

leads to a degree of repetitiveness in their responses. Of course, all of this touches on the ongoing debate around the design of course evaluations, and the related discussion of their effectiveness and the value of the feedback they provide. And this question of effectiveness is tied to other related research questions. For example, do qualitative comments from students to online evaluations (beyond the simple sum of positive and/or critical comments that I employed here) demonstrate more overall thoughtfulness, given the additional time students have available to them outside of class to complete an evaluation? If true, then a case could be made that online evaluations are more effective tools for teaching development, since the quality of their feedback and thus their usefulness relative to their in-class counterparts is greater, which perhaps makes the issue of lower response rates to online evaluations a secondary concern. However, these are all considerations that go beyond the scope of this article.

As a final point, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that while the strategy of offering an incentive appears to be a particularly effective strategy for boosting response rates, the ongoing implementation of this strategy poses challenges given the anonymity of the course-evaluation process, and the subsequent difficulty of giving a bonus only to those who completed an evaluation. Although this challenge is likely to be technologically surmountable, it is also true that other strategies for improving response rates that may be just as effective but that are not limited in this way likely exist. For example, one of my colleagues devotes a small portion of class time to allow students to complete online evaluations on their laptops or smartphones, and typically achieves rates of response in the 75-85% range. Since most students today have access to a laptop or phone in class, this strategy operates in many ways like an in-class evaluation, and thus achieves the relatively high response rates that are typical of this traditional approach compared to online evaluations, but also has the added benefit of expanding the pool of potential respondents beyond the classroom. This is a strategy that I plan to use the next time I teach Introduction to Sociology. I look forward to assessing its effectiveness.

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# How Information Literate Are They?

## A SAILS Study of (Mostly) First-Year Students at the U of L

By Sandra Cowan, Rumi Graham, and Nicole Eva

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### Introduction

In today's new normal of incessant, immersive, "instant" information, to what extent do students navigate their academic studies in information literate ways? Since information literacy (IL) is a core concern of librarianship, gauging the effectiveness of our IL teaching efforts is of perennial interest to librarians and educators. In our study we set out to measure U of L students' IL skill levels before and after receiving IL instruction to see if our teaching seems to make a difference. With the goal of informing our teaching practices, we conducted a pre- and post-test study of mainly first year students' IL abilities. We hoped to identify areas of strength that they likely possessed on entering university, as well as areas that may be ripe for focused IL instruction intended to help students expand and hone these essential, life-enriching skills and abilities.

IL is one of those elusive concepts in education. As with "liberal education," almost everything about IL is contested, including what to properly call it, its meaning, validity, scope, and its worthiness as a stand-alone discipline. But most educators and librarians interested in IL would agree that it is a foundational set of interdependent, habitually exercised abilities and informed understandings that:

- a) enable someone to find, evaluate, and successfully apply information to address particular goals or needs, and
- b) guide ethical use of information in the creation of new knowledge.

Sixteen years ago, the U.S.-based Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) adopted a document entitled *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* providing "a framework for assessing the information literate individual" (2000, p. 5). The competencies comprise five standards and 22 performance indicators requiring both lower order and higher order thinking skills. The ACRL standards are now

widely used to guide information literacy programming, instruction, and assessment.

Over the past few years there has been a movement to evolve conceptions of IL from specific competencies that students need to acquire and perform to a more nuanced perspective. The resulting document, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, was adopted by the ACRL in January 2015. It focuses on six frames, or threshold concepts, through which students must pass in order to become information literate. It views IL as a metaliteracy dependent on learners' "behavioral, affective, cognitive, and metacognitive engagement with the information ecosystem" (2015, p. 2).

In the new framework, IL instruction focuses less on skill acquisition and more on helping students develop understandings of underlying knowledge practices and dispositions that, in turn, foster information literate abilities and thinking processes. But both the older competency standards and the new framework encompass the idea that IL requires lower-order and higher-order thinking, with a greater emphasis on the latter in the new framework.

### SAILS Standardized Test

SAILS stands for Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills. It is a widely recognized validated information literacy test that consists of 45 multiple-choice questions that evaluate students' IL competencies in eight skill set areas of the ACRL standards. SAILS is currently available in two basic forms: individual testing and cohort testing (Project SAILS, 2016).

Just by chance, one of the researchers in our group won a door prize at a library conference that consisted of a free administration of SAILS for up to 5,000 students. The free testing started us on the path to this research project. We decided on a pre-test/post-test project, and applied for a Teaching Centre Teaching Development Fund grant to pay for the second administration (the post-test) of SAILS. We are very grateful to have been awarded the grant, which enabled us to carry out our research during the Fall 2015 semester.

If we had actually set out to choose a standardized IL test for our project, would we have chosen SAILS? Perhaps not, but the available choices are relatively few. In terms of reliable, validated instruments mapped in some fashion to ACRL's IL competency standards, we know of only a handful of other tests. All were developed in the U.S. and therefore likely reflect U.S.-centric test questions. In contrast, SAILS was developed with participation



from six Canadian academic libraries, and the cohort test became available worldwide in an international version in June 2014.

As two of the researchers were deeply involved in teaching IL components in U of L's first-year, multi-disciplinary courses Liberal Education 1000 and Writing 1000, and most of the instructors of these courses agreed to participate in the study, we decided to use the SAILS test with these groups of students.

### Testing in Liberal Education and Academic Writing Classes

Each of the instructors participating in our study gave one of the researchers access to the online component of their class in Moodle, so that we could insert the consent forms, test links, and related information, and communicate directly with their students. They encouraged, but did not require, their students to participate in the tests.

We ran two sessions, a pre-test and post-test, at the beginning and end of the Fall 2015 semester. For each participating course section, we placed a letter in Moodle inviting students to participate in our study. Interested students could follow a link taking them to a consent page located on the Library server. From there, they clicked through a unique URL to the SAILS server, where they completed the test. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained as no identifying information is requested or tracked on the SAILS test server. We were greatly assisted by Jake Cameron in Library systems support, who created custom-coded Web pages to manage the consent process and assignment of SAILS ID numbers.

Student test scores remained completely inaccessible to us throughout the study. We only knew which students had completed each test (but not how they scored), in order to award them their incentives for participation.

The incentive for the students, apart from knowing that they were contributing to research, was a chance to win a draw for one of two \$100 gift certificates from the U of L Bookstore. The Liberal Education students were also given a 3% bonus for completing both tests. This worked especially well, as we saw a very good participation rate among the students in this class – 61 out of 87 students completing the pre-test were from LBED 1000, and 61 out of 84 students completing the post-test were from LBED 1000. The draw alone did not seem to be sufficient incentive, as out of 10 participating sections of Writing 1000 (potentially 250 students), only 26 students completed the pre- test, and 22 the post-test.

The intervention, in the form of IL instruction, was somewhat different

for each course. The Writing 1000 students had an online, five-module library course in Moodle to complete, in addition to one in-class session with a librarian. As is standard for the library component of Writing 1000, several different librarians were involved in the in-class sessions. Between the online and face-to-face components, Writing 1000 students received about two hours of instruction in total. The Liberal Education students had a series of four in-class lab sessions taught by a librarian, including some online videos to view in advance of the classes, for a total of about four hours of instruction.

Each pre- and post-test consisted of 45 multiple-choice questions, drawn randomly from a question bank of 162. The SAILS international cohort test covers seven IL skill sets:

- Developing a research strategy
- selecting finding tools
- Searching
- Using finding tool features
- Retrieving sources
- Evaluating sources
- Documenting sources

### The SAILS Cohort

The SAILS international cohort test evaluates students' IL competency levels within the seven broad skill sets listed above, and reports on the results by groups. For example, for a given skill set, you can see how well the students at your institution performed in comparison to students at the rest of the institutions (grouped together), in terms of the extent to which their average scores are above or below the average scores of the entire cohort.

Test scores themselves are not reported, so you can only see how your students did in comparison to the cohort benchmark, rather than whether their actual scores were high or low. The results compare your institution to other similar institutions—in our case, doctorate institutions—who have taken the test in the past three years, and against all other institutions who have taken the SAILS cohort test.

In Fall 2015, a total of 6,370 students from 14 different institutions took

the SAILS cohort test. The cohort benchmark, however, included SAILS test results from the period spanning 2013 to 2015 (55,191 student tests). The cohort comprised 69 institutions: 11 doctorate-granting (including the U of L), 23 masters' level, 23 baccalaureate, and 12 associate or two-year degree institutions. We were the only Canadian institution to participate. Some institutions participated several times during the 2013 to 2015 cohort period, so are heavily represented in the benchmark (e.g., general baccalaureate Ashford University had 13 test sessions in the cohort, representing 33% of the total benchmark). This could throw off the results, with one school having a disproportionate impact on the benchmark.

Of the 10 other institutions in our doctoral cohort, the majority of students tested were in either first or fourth year, and the most common majors self-identified by test takers were Sciences, Management, Health Sciences, Engineering/Computer Science, Social Sciences, and Other. The majority of U of L test takers were first-year students, and the most commonly reported majors were Sciences, Education, and Social Sciences (see Figures 1 and 2). Thus, our results may not be completely comparable.

Figure 1

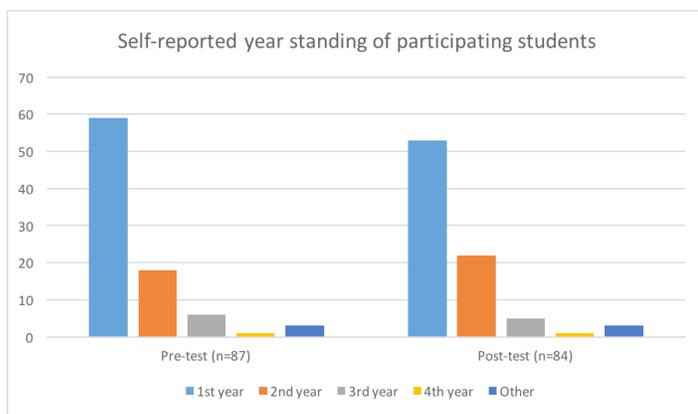
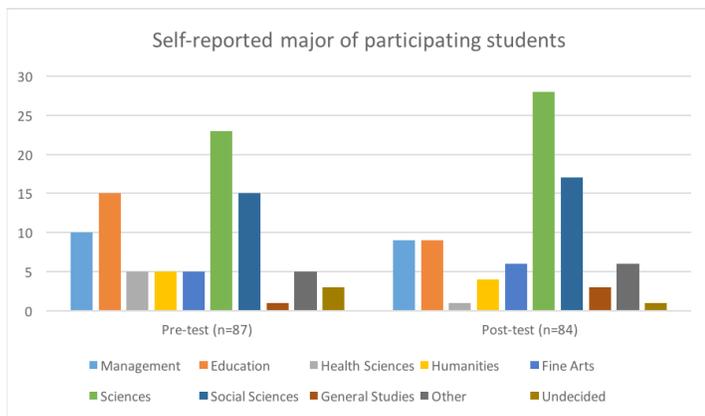


Figure 2



## Results

Due to the limitations of both our small sample size and the cohort test model, we can only make a few tentative observations about our results. Because the majority (68%) of the students said they were in first year, most of our observations relate to first-year students. Overall, the test shows that our students seem to have good skills in Developing a Research Strategy and Searching. U of L students performed better than the institution-type benchmark on both of these skills in both the pre- and post-tests, so it may be the case that at least some of our students enter university with better than average skill levels in these areas.

However, while in the pre-test U of L students also scored better than the benchmark on Retrieving Sources and Evaluating Sources, their post-test scores in these skill set areas were no better than other institutions. Although this seems counterintuitive, not all students who took the pre-test also took the post-test and vice versa. And because each SAILS cohort test was comprised of a set of 45 randomly selected questions, the pre- and post-tests themselves were not identical. Therefore we cannot conclude that students did “worse” on the post-test than the pre-test.

Table 1

U of L Cohort Comparison With Doctoral Institutions Benchmark		
	Pre-test	Post-test
<b>Above Benchmark</b>	Retrieving Sources Evaluating Sources Developing a Research Strategy Searching	Developing a Research Strategy Searching
<b>At Benchmark</b>	Selecting Finding Tools Documenting Sources Using Finding Tool Features	Documenting Sources Retrieving Sources Using Finding Tool Features Evaluating Sources
<b>Below Benchmark</b>		Selecting Finding Tools

As illustrated in Table 1, the pre-test results indicate that U of L students performed at about the same skill level as the doctoral institution benchmark for Selecting Finding Tools, Using Finding Tool Features, and Documenting Sources. In the pre-test there were no skill sets in which our students performed worse than the benchmark. In the post-test, however, U of L students as a group scored below the benchmark for Selecting Finding Tools and were at par with the benchmark for Documenting Sources and Using Finding Tool Features. In the pre-test, our students tested the best on Retrieving Sources and the worst on Using Finding Tool Features. In the post-test, they performed best on Using Finding Tool Features and worst on Evaluating Sources.

The pre-test demographic profiles of the test-takers also differed from the post-test profiles in notable ways. For example, for the skill set Developing a Research Strategy, Management and Education students performed better than the benchmark and Sciences and Social Sciences students performed at the benchmark in the pre-test. But in the post-test, only Sciences and Social Sciences students performed better than the benchmark. Again, these results may seem inconsistent but perhaps say more about the drawbacks of the cohort test than about students' IL skill levels.

Given the limitations of the cohort test and our small sample size, among the few tentative conclusions we can draw about our study participants is that, on average, they performed fairly well against the cohort institutions as a whole, and in terms of other doctorate institutions. The only area in which they performed worse than the benchmark was Selecting Finding Tools (post-test only), so this may reveal a need to spend more time on this skill set during instruction. Because they consistently performed better than the benchmark on both Developing a Research Strategy and Searching, we

can perhaps put less emphasis on these skills to make room for greater focus on other areas.

## Interpretation of the Results

We have some theories about why some of our results seem incongruous. The group of students who completed the pre-test is not exactly the same group who completed the post-test. We know that roughly 80% of the students were the same, but that leaves 20% who only did one or the other test. This can skew the results.

Another variable is the questions themselves. By design, the cohort test did not permit us to choose which questions students would be given. All questions were randomly generated by SAILS from its 162-question database. The students received different questions on the pre- and post-tests, and it is likely that at least some questions related to content that was not taught in the course modules, labs, or classes.

Finally, there is the timing of the tests. Perhaps students were more eager, enthusiastic, and energetic at the beginning of the term, when they were given the opportunity to do the pre-test. By the time the post-test was open to them in November it seems entirely possible that students were feeling overworked, stressed, and fatigued. As other deadlines loomed, they may not have put in the same quality of effort in taking the post-test as they did in the pre-test.

## Lessons Learned

The SAILS cohort test compares test results from all participating institutions across North America. In the Fall 2015 semester, because we are a non-U.S. institution, it was the only option available to us. The benefit of a cohort test is that individual students are not identified, and you can broadly compare your own institution's results to those of other institutions who have taken the cohort test. These results are broken down by skill set, major, and class standing, so you can see if your institution does better, worse, or about the same as other institutions in that category.

However, a drawback of the cohort test is the lack of individuality. It is not possible to know whether the same students did well on all skills, or if one student did very well on one skill while doing poorly on another. We can't even be certain how many of the students who did the pre-test also did the post-test. We can make some general assumptions based on response rate, but exact details remain unknown. Thus, the cohort test gave us some broad, general indications, but not enough data to come to any solid conclusions about the IL skill levels students had already attained upon entering university, what they learned in the seven skill set areas during Fall 2015, and if they did better in the post-test.

Another weakness of the SAILS cohort test is that it ended up comparing our students to themselves. Because we did both a pre-and post-test with the same students, and both groups were included in the cohort, in effect we were compared against ourselves as part of the cohort in the SAILS-generated statistical report. Looking at the other institutions in the cohort, it would appear that none of them did a pre- and post-test in 2015; most only administered the test once. So perhaps a pre- and post-test design is used infrequently in SAILS testing, which may be why SAILS has not accounted for this oddity.

It was clear that a grade incentive is key to students' voluntary participation in this type of research study. Overall, Liberal Education students participated at a much higher rate than Writing 1000 students, accounting for 71.3% of all completed tests. Liberal Education students were entered in the Bookstore gift-certificate draw and received a bonus 3% for completing both tests, while Writing 1000 students had only the draw to incentivize them. It appears that a draw wasn't enough of a draw!

Our experiences gave rise to definite ideas on what we would do differently

in subsequent studies. We successfully reapplied for the Teaching Centre's Teaching Development Fund to pay for two more administrations of the SAILS test for Fall 2016. But this time, we will use the Build Your Own Test (BYOT), which became available worldwide in January 2016. As it allows us to choose all test questions, we anticipate the BYOT will provide a more meaningful post-test, as we can ensure the students are given questions for which most of the concepts have actually been taught. While maintaining anonymity, it will also allow us to compare individual students' pre- and post-test results to explore whether their information literacy skill levels appear to improve after library instruction.

The second change we plan to make is to include two courses that focus specifically on library research and information literacy concepts, Library Science 2000 and Library Science 0520, both of which are taught by a U of L librarian. The course instructor has agreed to provide class time in which to complete the pre- and post-tests, which we hope will result in a very high participation rate. We have also obtained the agreement of the Liberal Education 1000 instructor to participate once again in our follow-up study. All students who participate in our Fall 2016 study will be offered the incentive of a gift certificate draw and bonus marks for test completions.

While the results of our initial test seemed largely inconclusive, we were reassured that U of L students performed well in comparison to the cohort, particularly in the areas of Developing a Research Strategy and Searching. Participating in the SAILS cohort test was an interesting experience, but it did not give us the concrete evidence we had hoped for in terms of students' knowledge of information literacy concepts before and after receiving instruction from a librarian. We look forward to learning more about the abilities of students both before and after information literacy instruction in another round of SAILS testing, this time using the new BYOT version of the test. We anticipate that the next round of tests will give us more data to help inform IL instructional programming, a key part of the post-secondary teaching agenda.

## Acknowledgements

We were assisted by many contributors, without whom this study would not have been possible. We would like to thank Shelly Wismath from Liberal Education; Cliff Lobe, Helen Connolly, Natasha Reby, and Stefanie Stiles from Academic Writing; Jake Cameron from the Library's Information Systems team; Library Administration for funding the gift certificates; and the Teaching Centre for their support and the Teaching Development Fund grant. And we sincerely thank the Liberal Education 1000 and Writing 1000 students who participated in our study by completing the SAILS tests in Fall 2015.

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# Trials & Tribulations

## OF TEAM-BASED LEARNING IN A LARGE LECTURE CLASSROOM

by Jan Newberry,  
Jeff Meadows, Amy Mack,  
and Hunter Guthrie

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*Hunter Guthrie is an anthropologist, currently writing his master's thesis. He did his fieldwork in Bolivia on issues of environmental sustainability in agricultural communities.*

In Fall 2015, the four of us (Jan Newberry, Amy Mack, Hunter Guthrie, and Jeff Meadows) took part in a mad experiment to try team-based learning (TBL) in PE250, a 300-seat lecture theatre on the University of Lethbridge campus. Here we summarize the trials and tribulations of this pilot. Jan will provide an introduction to TBL along with how and why it was used for Anthropology 1000. Jeff will then consider the logistical issues, from space to data-management. Then Amy will discuss student engagement before Hunter describes the peer-evaluation process.

### Jan: Team-based learning

My introductory anthropology course was one of the set of courses taken by first-year students in the new Faculty of Arts & Science Global Citizenship cohort program, organized around the initial theme of water, sustainability, and social justice. As I contemplated how to deal with the specific needs of the 18-cohort students in a large introductory lecture course of 278, it occurred to me that by organizing the entire class through small groups, all of the students would have the benefit of this approach. On the search for a way to organize a large course through small-group work, I stumbled on TBL. Their website is an excellent resource for thinking about and planning for TBL in your classroom (<http://www.teambasedlearning.org>).

Before outlining the TBL process, let me be clear that I had high hopes for several reasons. First, by giving all students a cohort-type experience, I hoped to create the social networks of support that make a campus “sticky” enough to keep students in class and in school. TBL also offered the opportunity for enhanced content aimed specifically at first-year students; the group structure could be used to consider some of the dilemmas and obstacles typically faced by young students in a kind of super-1000 course. Finally, the TBL approach solved my long-standing dilemma: how to cover the breadth necessary for an introductory anthropology course assessed through multiple-choice examinations while still preparing students for the conceptual and writing-based work they would confront in later classes.

The TBL approach is associated primarily with Larry Michaelsen (Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2004), who developed it in the context of business education. What appealed to me was the structure for students to work collaboratively but with accountability. Michaelsen and Sweet (2011, p. 41) identify the four practical elements of TBL as:

- strategically formed, permanent teams;
- readiness assurance;
- application activities that promote both critical thinking and team development; and
- peer evaluation.

TBL emphasizes permanent teams formed by the instructor. We conducted a short survey of students using a Scantron score sheet. We asked about their year in school, their hometown, and their comfort with leading discussion and taking part in TBL. Using this information, we built 40 groups of seven that included at least one self-identified leader and one older student. These groups worked together for the entire semester.

One cornerstone of TBL is a continuous readiness assurance process (RAP). For each unit of material covered, the RAP includes an individual readiness assurance test (iRAT), which is a short multiple-choice test, and then a team readiness assurance test (tRAT). That is, once students turn in their individual tests, they then take the same test again in their “cohort” group.

For Anthropology 1000, there were originally 10 RAPs across the semester. This amount of testing was not typical for me, and the pace meant less time to lecture. At first, I struggled with what I perceived as a lack of time for content, but the great benefit was that I was forced to reflect on what was crucial in an introductory anthropology course—a very useful exercise. Michaelsen and Sweet (2011) argue that “TBL enables instructors to achieve equal or better content coverage and still use 70 to 80 percent of class time with students engaged in activities that deepen understanding of how course content applies to real-life situations and problems” (p. 42). Ultimately, the trade-off was worth it for me. The content that was sacrificed was some of the supporting detail on specific cases. What

I found that by focusing more strongly on delivering the conceptual content, the need for extra explanatory details was greatly reduced. Instead, the tRAT process allowed students to identify specifically what else they needed to know. So, rather than presenting several cases of kinship variation, I could focus with more clarity on why kinship matters in social analysis.

But how do you administer 278 individual tests and then immediately move to groups to take the same test? In this case, we decided to use old-school techniques: the Scantron and number two pencil. Jeff will talk a little about this in his section. We purchased the scratch cards sold by the Team-Based Learning Cooperative through the website noted above. The scratch cards come with access to test-building software to easily build exams that matched the cards. Despite the logistical issues, the group tests proved to be one of the best parts of the TBL approach.

Imagine: after each individual test, a group of students would immediately sit together with a scratch card and a coin to decide which answers were correct. The air of lottery-card luck was in the room, but in fact, the desire to do well on the test required the group to confer, consult, debate, and articulate why one answer was better than another. This aspect of TBL was the most important to me for many reasons. First, the energy in the room was electric. It was loud and sometimes appeared chaotic, but as I walked through the room I heard students talk about the concepts they had learned, their readings, and my lecture in ways I had never heard in other introductory courses.

What may be not so obvious is the extent to which the tRAT stimulates students to interact in much the same way as they would in a formal reciprocal teaching situation. In their search for correct answers, students invariably alternate in and out of a teacher's role by asking each other the kinds of questions that the teacher normally would ask. For example, on any given question, students might ask each other to make predictions, explain their rationales for those predictions, and clarify their different understandings of the material (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2011, p. 44).

There are two significant outcomes here. First, students must begin to articulate *in their own words* the answers to test questions. It is here that conceptual learning really begins. Whether the question asks for simple facts or an analysis, the students must engage in the metacognitive behaviour of explaining it to others and in terms they can understand. This "reciprocal teaching" is also a key part of building functioning networks of trust in the group. One unexpected benefit was that the collaborative work emboldened students to pose critical questions. After each group test, I routinely entertained questions that allowed me to further explain

concepts. I confess it was not entirely easy to be challenged in this way, but as this allowed students to present arguments based on course readings and lectures, I found I could endure it!

For me, this group-testing moment highlights the core value of the TBL approach, but the other aspects critically support it. For example, the individual test means that students are rewarded for their own efforts as well, something that motivated, high-achieving students cared about immensely. Then, there was the peer-evaluation system that provides a method for accountability. In fact, the first method of student accountability is the sheer weight of peer pressure to arrive in class with a contribution. However, if a student does not come prepared and repeatedly relies on the work of others alone, the peer-evaluation process allows that to be reflected in their grade. For this course, each RAP was 25 points: 10 points for the individual exam, 10 points for the group exam, and 5 points for their peer evaluation. The peer-evaluation mark was a composite average of the marks they received from all of their peers. They could also lose 1.5 points for failing to provide reviews of their peers. Hunter will add more about this process and its shortcomings below. Here, I will only say that next time I will spend more time teaching the evaluation as a community standard.

Two other aspects of the TBL approach deserve mention. The first is the appeal process. Students could challenge test questions that they found unfair but they were required to appeal *as a group* and to use a standard form to make an argument based on the course materials (reading and lecture). I dreaded these at first, but in fact, received very few and all of them showed that the students had to consult one another as well as course materials (again!) to make their arguments. How can I quibble with a process that has students reviewing, reanalyzing, and making informed arguments?

Finally, there was the application exercise. Again, these applications made me think critically about what exactly I wanted to convey. In class, I would pose a statement (typically using a PowerPoint slide) that asked each group to make a choice to agree, disagree, or ask for clarification. Groups used colour-coded cards to indicate their choice to the class. This simple procedure was very powerful as groups could immediately see whether their choice was widely supported or in the minority. Volunteers were asked to stand and explain their group's decision. There was never any shortage of volunteers. The only hindrance was the fear of speaking in front of such a large class, but the energy of the discussion often carried students over that barrier.

All aspects of the TBL process turned out to be worthwhile, but in this first iteration, they did pose a bit of a logistical nightmare.

## Jeff: Logistics

In early conversations with Jan about this course and her desire to engage students in small-group work in a large lecture-style classroom, it became immediately apparent that the class was going to create some rather unique logistical issues.

Tied up in the TBL process is the creation of permanent working groups of students that required the careful creation of the groups based on the previously mentioned survey questions. Just as stated by Michaelsen and Sweet (2008), there were many factors to consider when creating the groups (distribution of member resources and minimizing barriers to group cohesiveness), the time and effort that we put into this process was vital in the group success rate that we observed and going forward is going to continue to be a time-consuming but important part of the process. Even with this work, we still had groups that never quite came together (although this was not outwardly apparent, the graduate TAs had an opportunity to gather more feedback from these students and groups).

The classroom itself was initially perceived to be a possible barrier to realizing TBL with this class. Because it is a large, tiered, fixed-table classroom, many people (ourselves included) would think that getting students into groups and working in groups would be difficult. In fact, it turned out that PE250 has more room for students to move around than some of the other tiered classrooms on campus. This allowed for students to get into their groups quite quickly and easily and some students even chose to make use of the floor within the entrance spaces and other spaces that might not have been considered to work in their groups.

The next logistical hurdle was simply the act of having 270-plus students writing multiple-choice exams when they were sitting so close to each other. Each exam needed to be created with multiple versions to minimize the possibility of cheating, which then had to be graded according to the correct answer keys. The TAs had the task of preparing and keeping the group folders organized during the term. We had to continually remind ourselves that this process was as new for the students as it was for us and with each activity we refined our instruction set and checks to ensure that students were completing the technical parts of the tasks that were required. Fortunately, the process for taking the graded Scantron marks and getting them imported into Moodle was relatively straightforward, requiring only the addition of student usernames based on their U of L ID number for the import. The collection and grading of the group tests (tRAT) could not be automated and were handled manually, but this process was not very onerous.

The next major hurdle was the group peer-

evaluation process that was part of each cycle. In order to try to automate this process a little bit, a Google Form was created that had the evaluation rubric for each student/group to complete (in order to help minimize errors and streamline the collection). Once a few initial bumps were smoothed out, the students seemed to get a handle on this process and it seemed to work reasonably well for them. The problem was that this process generated a very large amount of data that needed to be sorted through and then translated back to the students anonymously.

Grading for the course was a bit of a struggle throughout the term (not the act of calculating, but the act of presenting the grades to the students in an easily viewable format) because there were several components in each RAP. The grading scheme that was selected allowed for the students to drop the lowest score for the term as a means to lower some of the apprehension about the process as well as to allow some margin for attendance without too great a penalty. This allowance created a situation where each of the graded portions (iRAT, tRAT, and peer evaluation) were all linked together from a grade perspective and were displayed to students.

One main goal for the next iteration of this course is to streamline the peer-evaluation process. We have already begun looking at alternative methods that will facilitate the sharing of peer-evaluation feedback while minimizing the amount of intervention required in this process. Ensuring that this process can be easily tied to grading will also be important.

### Amy: Student engagement

As a teaching assistant I was tasked initially with organizational and administrative duties. However, once in the classroom,

one of my tasks became mentoring students on effective group work. As Jan noted above, there was pushback to TBL, and this was a reaction I would have empathized with in my first year. By my fourth year, however, I had discovered that I could learn a lot from my peers and that they weren't as intimidating as I'd once thought. Even so, when I shared this story with the groups, it was met with varying degrees of skepticism.

In the beginning, students repeatedly asked for assistance instead of learning together. They were unsure of their abilities and were distrustful of their peers. They wanted a non-student to tell them what to think. By mid-semester, however, trust and rapport had developed within most groups, and so they relied less and less on our knowledge. When asked if they needed assistance, they would respond with some version of "nope" or "we've got it." It became evident that they had figured out how to learn from one another. It was also evident that the students took my advice to get to know one another. I heard many conversations about friending one another on Facebook and saw them together on campus. On the last day some groups were hugging goodbye for the semester and taking group selfies. So, despite some initial resistance, many students walked away from the course believing my tale of effective group work.

As one might expect, this level of rapport, trust, and camaraderie was not established in all groups. I had a number of "backroom" conversations in which students vented about disappointing or difficult group members. A fourth-year management student described it as "one of the worst group experiences" of his academic career. Another disclosed that while he saw the usefulness of the TBL method—and was quite pleased with his grade—he wasn't sure it was worth putting up with his group's dynamics. While it is not necessary for students to become

lifelong friends with their group members, the contrast between these groups and the self-taking groups was striking.

This contrast has prompted a discussion within our team as to what our roles as facilitators and educators are when a group becomes unhealthy. Research done on future TBL classes may help articulate these roles and identify the extent to which we should intervene. Moreover, there was a gap in our strategies for identifying such groups that such research could address. One method of identifying groups with exceptional or troublesome members that was employed in this iteration was the peer evaluations, which Hunter will discuss below.

### Hunter: Peer evaluations

Similar to Amy's experience, as a teaching assistant I encountered a rather hectic situation that I had not planned for prior to my arrival in class roughly three or four weeks into the semester. On my first day I was thrust in front of the classroom and introduced as Jan's jet-lagged TA and newest addition to her team of support. I, along with Amy, had the pleasure of dealing with the administrative duties of the peer evaluations.

Throughout this class we employed two forms of peer evaluations: a short-form survey used for each RAP and a long-form evaluation used once in which students were asked to produce a written response that would provide tangible feedback to their group members. In addition to the sheer weight of peer pressure urging students to arrive in class prepared, the short-form evaluation afforded group members an avenue for accountability as it asked a number of questions regarding "cooperative learning skills," "self-directed learning skills," and "interpersonal skills" aimed at the assessment, reward, or penalization of other member's



preparation and contributions for the RAP cycle. To figure each student's score, we quantified the one-word responses from the evaluation and then took their average; thus, the peer-evaluation mark was a composite average of the marks they received from all of their peers. Each short evaluation was worth a total of 5 points, including 1.5 points that could be deducted for failing to provide reviews of their peers.

While the short-form peer evaluation provided a consistent, dependable, and worthwhile platform for students to receive feedback on their weekly performance, it certainly was not without its shortcomings. For example, across the semester it became apparent that some groups had agreed to game the system by giving all members perfect scores, even if some were absent, while other students sought to pad their scores by filling out evaluations on the behalf of other students who had not been present in class. Finally, one other troublesome characteristic for me was the matter of quantifying the quality of contributions made by group members within a scale of 0 to 4 as I found it insufficient and unrepresentative of the range of student's contributions and preparedness. In sum, the short-form peer evaluations are a good way to provide consistent feedback and assessment for group members given how often it occurs and the fact that it is anonymous, however it may be beneficial to think of other ways to assign numerical grades to such an evaluation.

The second type of peer evaluation we employed was very similar in that we asked the same questions; however, it differed because we requested qualitative responses for the purposes of mutual evaluation only and not for the purposes of grading. The long-form evaluation was even more administration-intensive given the length of the responses that had to be cut-and-pasted into a single document. It was administered only once due to the amount of time it took to sort and return to the

students; thus it remained underutilized in this first attempt at a TBL approach in the large introductory class. Although a lot of work, the long-form peer evaluation proved to be a highly advantageous tool as it provided narrative feedback through constructive criticism or positive encouragement and thus contributed to group cohesion (or perhaps dissolution depending on the context). Indeed, the written responses that students received from their peers contained information and viewpoints that would personally affect the person being reviewed and thus required a degree of maturity from all group members. In fact, this was one of the more beneficial outcomes of both peer evaluations and group work more generally, as learning how to work within a team as well as giving and receiving feedback are crucial life skills that are central to most everyone's success in their professional lives.

All said and done, both the short-form and long-form peer evaluations proved to be beneficial as they provided an outlet for students to voice their satisfaction or discontent with their group anonymously. What's more, the process of learning how to give and receive constructive feedback through peer evaluations is a necessary skill that most students will have to develop throughout their time in university and beyond. My suggestions for improvement would be to put more emphasis on qualitative feedback (i.e., written responses) rather than arbitrary numbers, continue to allow anonymity for group members in their evaluations, and find a way to improve the process of administration including the streamlining of the entire peer-evaluation process, as Jeff alluded to above.

## Conclusion

So, there you have it. Would we do it again? Yes. What we learned from this pilot was that the team-based learning approach offers big benefits in

terms of student interaction and engagement with the material during class time. The evaluations showed that the majority of the students really enjoyed the approach (despite some initial trepidation about group work), and that for most of them it was a very rewarding and engaging experience. And although we don't have the numbers yet, it appears that fewer students dropped the class than in the past. What we don't know yet is whether the group work translates into supportive social networks beyond the classroom that increase the retention generally or whether conceptual understanding was in fact increased by this method. So, yes, we'll do it again this fall – but this time with six undergraduate student researchers, supported by a Teaching Development grant, who will, like good anthropologists, gather ethnographic data to answer these questions.

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# MAKING CONNECTIONS

THROUGH UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH



by Kristine Alexander, Ashley  
Henrickson, and Taylor Little  
Mustache

*Kristine Alexander is a Canada Research Chair in Child and Youth Studies, Assistant Professor of History, and Director of the Institute for Child and Youth Studies at the University of Lethbridge.*

*Ashley Henrickson recently completed a combined BA/BEEd degree at the University of Lethbridge, and will be starting her MA in History at the U of L in the fall. She plans to study the experiences of underage Canadian soldiers during the First World War.*

*Taylor Little Mustache is an upper-level undergraduate student in Native American Studies and History at the University of Lethbridge. She plans to complete a combined BA/BEEd degree in the near future.*

### Kristine Alexander

One of my favourite things about the University of Lethbridge is its commitment to student-centred, research-informed teaching and learning. While graduate training is an important and growing part of our mandate as a comprehensive university, I think our commitment to involving undergraduate students in research is worth preserving and celebrating.

As a Canada Research Chair, I am expected to train specific numbers of “HQP” (Tri-Council code for “highly qualified personnel,” also known as students). Undergraduate students play an especially important role in my research program, both as research assistants and collaborators. As this article will demonstrate, involving undergraduates in research demonstrates and clarifies the kinds of intellectual work professors do beyond the classroom. It also builds students’ confidence, supports the U of L’s commitment to the liberal-education goals of breadth, engagement, and critical thinking, and proves that personal connections are an important part of teaching.

This past year, I supervised two outstanding undergraduate research assistants, Ashley Henrickson and Taylor Little Mustache. In addition to working with my colleagues and I to create new knowledge and build community connections, Ashley and Taylor both presented their findings at the 2016 Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Calgary. I have asked them to reflect on how these experiences have shaped their academic skill sets as well as their broader long-term goals. Together, these reflections provide evidence of

the multiple ways that involving undergraduates in research and academic conferences can supplement and enrich teaching and learning at the U of L.

### Ashley Henrickson

Throughout my five-year combined Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Arts degree I was very fortunate to work with professors in the history and education departments who provided me with individualized research experience. Because of these unmatched experiences, as well as the valuable relationships I built, I will be completing a Master of Arts in History at the U of L. I would like to take this opportunity to share with other University staff and faculty the opportunities that were afforded to me and how they helped to prepare me for graduate school.

I received two Chinook Summer Research Awards that allowed me to work as a research assistant for Dr. Lynn Kennedy and then Dr. Kristine Alexander for the summer months. During this time I was able to work with primary sources to a larger extent than is possible during regular classes. During these summers I collected, summarized, categorized, and transcribed hundreds of sources such as newspaper articles, books, and letters. I also transcribed hundreds of soldier letters and articles. These awards also allowed me to experience what it is like to perform full-time research.

I was also fortunate to complete an applied study with Dr. Kennedy, as well as an independent study with both Dr. Alexander and Dr. Amy von Heyking. These courses allowed me to focus specifically on material that was of interest to me and to practice writing long academic papers. During these courses the professors provided me with verbal and written feedback on my research and writing.

*Without these opportunities provided by the University of Lethbridge I would be far less prepared to enter a graduate program.*

Recently, I was honoured to attend, as an undergraduate panelist, the Canadian Historical Association Congress with Dr. Alexander. Preparing for this conference was enlightening because I was able to see how conference papers are researched, written, and edited. At the conference I had the opportunity to meet numerous prominent historians, and attend insightful panels, business meetings, and social events. I was fascinated to see the collegiality between historians and the breadth of history

that is studied in Canada. Few undergraduate students were in attendance at this event, and even fewer were panelists. I know that this opportunity was afforded to me because of Dr. Alexander's commitment to further undergraduate research, for which I am very grateful.

Without these opportunities provided by the U of L I would be far less prepared to enter a graduate program, especially in regard to locating and interpreting primary sources. I would also likely have chosen to attend a larger institution. However, after these experiences I realize that the benefits of remaining in at the U of L are large and plentiful. The professors in the departments of history and education are very dedicated to their students' success, and the institution offers unmatched and meaningful research opportunities for its students.

### Taylor Little Mustache

As an undergrad you are exposed to so many wonderful opportunities that help broaden your perspective and your world views. I am a Native American Studies major and a History minor, with the hopes of becoming a teacher in the near future along with becoming a university basketball coach. This past year, I completed an applied study with Dr. Kristine Alexander that allowed me to get involved with collaborative, community-engaged research. My applied study work, which I am continuing this summer, involves acting as a research assistant on a project called "Raising Spirit: The Opokaasin Digital Storytelling Project." Through this position, I work both with researchers at the U of Ls Institute for Child and Youth Studies (I-CYS) and Opokaasin Early Intervention Society, a local NGO that supports indigenous children and families in southern Alberta. It is one of my responsibilities to build rapport with the children and create a level of trust so that there is an easier transition into the interviewing processes. I also have been doing a lot of data collection, which increased my skill set and helped me better understand the importance of ethics, protocol, and timelines, and solidified my research capabilities. I am also learning new things such as proper interviewing and transcribing skills, which in turn will assist me better in my future educational endeavours.

At Congress, I spoke about my work on the Opokaasin project. Along with my U of L mentors and fellow project members Dr. Alexander, Dr. Jan Newberry (principal investigator), recent MA graduate Amy Mack, and I-CYS postdoctoral fellow Dr. Erin Spring, I took part in a round-table discussion on "Research in Indigenous Young People's Cultures" sponsored by the Association for Research in Cultures of Young People (ARCYP). This experience was both profound and humbling; it felt as though I got to see a glimpse of my future by presenting alongside great educators and researchers from

several different universities. Although at times it did seem a bit overwhelming to be surrounded by such brilliant minds, it did encourage me to continue to push myself further and reach my ultimate goal of getting my PhD.

This conference also gave me the opportunity to attend other sessions from which I benefited so much. I met Dr. Cindy Blackstock, director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and member of the Board of Directors of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Dr. Blackstock, a powerful advocate for indigenous children in Canada, was the keynote speaker for an interdisciplinary panel entitled "Sharing the Land, Sharing the Future." This presentation changed my perspective completely and better clarified and supported the reasons why I, too, am trying to make a difference for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, specifically youth. Dr. Blackstock then led a breakout session with further discussion on the reconciliation and the well-being of indigenous children; I felt as though I were back in the classroom setting anxiously waiting to ask questions after the lecture. In addition to meeting Dr. Blackstock I also met a number of other indigenous historians from universities across Canada whose research I am keen to learn more about. I was introduced to these historians during a panel on "Historical Scholarship and Teaching in Canada after the TRC" at the Canadian Historical Association conference.

Overall this experience was awesome and I was honoured to have presented on behalf of this project. It was also very humbling to get a blessing from one of my elders who came to listen to our presentation. He expressed how proud he was of our research team and encouraged us to continue our important work.

### Accompanying Images

Taylor Little Mustache and Cindy Blackstock at the 2016 Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Calgary.

# Before your FIRST CLASS

Twice a year the Teaching Centre offers a half-day workshop for all new faculty and instructors, to help them prepare to teach classes at the University of Lethbridge. This informal half-day session addresses critical information and skills necessary to confidentially organize and prepare to teach classes at U of L.

### During this interactive workshop, attendees will:

-  identify requirements for an effective course outline
-  develop course objectives and outcomes
-  develop a course assessment plan and class schedule
-  consider appropriate instructional materials and activities
-  discuss methods for establishing an effective teaching/learning environment
-  are introduced to classroom and learning management technologies



# Positive Working Relationships

by John Poulsen and Danica Lee

*John is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education and a former Teaching Centre Fellow*

*Danica is a recent graduate with an MEd Counselling degree.*

The purpose of this article was to investigate and share the elements of a successful working relationship between a graduate student and a faculty supervisor. The method as to how this relationship was explored was by both parties reflecting on their stories and experiences in multiweekly journal entries and by an examination of supporting literature. The authors of this article shared what, for them, were important elements in a working relationship. That is, through examination of the literature and their own metacognition, the authors came to the realization that theirs' was

a productive and enjoyable relationship due in large part to mutual respect and consistent back-and-forth feedback.

## Introduction

This article deals with the examination of a working relationship involving a University faculty member (John – Associate Professor, Faculty of Education) who became the grad assistantship coordinator of a graduate assistant (Danica – Master of Counselling student, Faculty of Education). A call will often go out

to ask if Education faculty would value a grad student to assist in their research. Often it is the case that a grad student is promised an assistantship with a commensurate scholarship but there is no obvious faculty to take the grad student on. In such cases faculty and graduate students are placed together based more on availability than on similar research interests. John and Danica became a faculty/grad student dyad in September 2015.

Over the course of this assigned research assistantship, we examined what was required and necessary for our healthy and productive working relationship. We made manifest our own metacognition as Joseph (2003) defined as "... the mental process of analyzing our own thinking, to advance intellectually and personally" (p. 109) by writing and speaking directly about our developing relationship. This form of paired metacognition yielded interesting results that, in retrospect, may seem simple and perhaps obvious.

The purpose of this article is to add information regarding faculty/graduate student success. Austin (2002), investigating graduate-student experiences, asked students to draw pictures of their journey through graduate school. She states, "It is noteworthy that many pictures featured cliffs, swamps, mountains, and other challenging geographic details" (p. 106). That is, the graduate-school experience can be difficult and we believe that our story of how we created an effective dyad may have applicability to other experiences. Our theoretical framework is that relationship must be the basis of any human-to-human interaction and graduate work is no exception. As O'Meara, Knudsen, and Jones (2013) stated, "In fact, one topic that is understudied in the literature, but vitally important, is the human factors involved in the faculty-student relationship" (p. 316). Our investigation melds our own journal entries with relevant literature to tell our story. That is, we are using our own words to clarify our metacognition.

*About a month ago I applied for a grad student to help me with an area of potential research. I filled out the proper forms that my Faculty required and waited. Approximately a week later I found out that I was assigned Danica. Our first conversation was easy and direct. We then agreed to meet via Zoom [a video conferencing program] but somehow we did not connect on screen. We corresponded via e-mail and quickly established telephone contact. Not connecting via Zoom could have made our following discussion difficult. There can be a certain amount of frustration when people are bamboozled by technology but I found that within minutes we had a firm foundation of positivity to work from. Rather than causing difficulties I felt that the Zoom misconnect gave us a sense of efficacy—*

*that even though technology failed us we were able to persevere and achieve success. (John Poulsen, personal communication, September 20, 2015)*

*I just spoke with my grad assistantship coordinator, Dr. John Poulsen, on the phone. This is the third time we have spoken over the phone and so far this has been our only method of communication other than e-mail. Today we spoke about changing the focus of our work. Based on some of the preliminary work done, we've decided to focus on what makes a good relationship between graduate student assistants and the faculty coordinators (supervisors). Surprisingly, I'm not as disappointed as I thought I would be about the change of plans, which is interesting for me. I'm quite happy to explore a new option that fits better for us. I am also interested in this work as I can directly relate to the topic area. Our discussions so far have been very respectful and the positive encouragement and feedback about my work to this point has helped me stay on top of the work and motivated. (Danica Lee, personal communication, September 30, 2015)*

## Building Relationship

Once foundational elements of getting to know each other are established, opportunities can be made for each party to share more about who he/she is. Davidson and Foster-Johnson (2001) shared "To mentor well, it is also necessary to know one's protégé" (p. 565). By having knowledge of the graduate student, mentors are welcomed to understand and explore values, behaviours, and attitudes that may contribute to the relationship (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). As respect, trust, and openness build between faculty member and student, it becomes easier to share information, or elements of one's story, with the other party knowing that it will be held in a good way. Opening up the discussion around personal identities can allow for self-disclosure of personal experiences.

*For today, I am going to share some inner thoughts and processes that took place in the time leading up to the commencement of my work together with Dr. Poulsen. I applied for this graduate-assistant opportunity in the spring after talking to one of the members of my cohort about her experience last year. I was hesitant to apply because I was worried about what would be expected and whether or not my abilities would suffice. I was also worried about the physical distance between me and my future graduate assistant coordinator. Although I have been completing my program through a blended model of delivery and have found comfort in this model, I found it hard to comprehend how this would work with a significant distance between me and my future mentor. I must also share some of my more personal*

*feelings, perhaps self-judgments, about this experience. Because the program I am in seems to be a more applied program versus research based, I was worried about what it might be like to walk in that world and work with an academic. At times I was worried about whether or not my skills would be up to standard or if I even had the right vocabulary to hold an intelligent conversation over the phone. Without speaking for my fellow students, I really feel that there might be some misconceptions about what working alongside a professor is like. It is an interesting shift from sitting in a classroom and taking in lectures to working on a joint project together, sharing ideas, and providing each other with feedback. I was worried about the shift in power dynamics and I did not entirely know what to expect. (Danica Lee, personal communication, October 3, 2015)*

*A culture of reciprocal and respectful feedback allows for each party to contribute to the work in a meaningful way and show support for one another.*

## Feedback

Feedback that is focused on performance and personal growth emerged in the literature as an important element of effective mentoring and supervisory relationships. Feedback in any type of relationship can be challenging, thus it is important that it comes from a foundation of respect. Austin (2002) shared that graduate students reported a desire for explicit feedback from faculty regarding their progress in their various roles associated with being a graduate student. It was also shared that positive feedback, along with respectful gestures, was identified as an influencer of motivation by graduate students (Christensen & Menzel, 1998, as cited in Lechuga, 2011). Similarly, international students identified a lack of feedback as a potential source of conflict between themselves and their faculty supervisors (Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler, 2007). Not only is feedback required from faculty to students regarding student performance, faculty also appreciate receiving feedback from their mentees with reference to their performance as a mentor and what may be necessary to address in order to make positive changes (Cesa & Fraser, 1989).

A culture of reciprocal and respectful feedback allows for each party to contribute to the work in a meaningful way and show support for one another. Austin (2003) states that important in

graduate-student success was, "Greater attention to providing explicit feedback" (p. 138). In our example, weekly feedback through reviewing one another's journal entries and openly discussing not only the literature surrounding this topic but the relationship as it developed, was profound. Journaling and weekly discussions provided opportunities for accountability to each other, oneself, and the work.

Journaling became the basis for internal feedback about the developing relationship and an opportunity to process the experience. Faith (2007) shared that the practice of reflective journaling can facilitate both the "learning and unlearning" (p. 10) in the development as an educator as it allows space to explore incongruent beliefs, examine self-talk, and question commonly held beliefs about what academia "should" be. Our experience of reflection provided through the journaling exercise contributed to our growing relationship.

*When I think about past working relationships that I have been involved in, the level and type of feedback provided really seemed to set a tone for the outcome of the relationship. I tend to be generally unsure of myself and lack confidence in my work. This is especially obvious when I am trying new things or learning about topics that are outside of my area of experience. What I have noticed about myself is that I generally work better after receiving some sort of feedback, both positive and constructive. This helps me know that I am on the right track with regard to what is expected of me, but it also seems to provide me with motivation to continue or improve. Generally I find that having at least one positive and one constructive comment helps me improve and continue moving forward. I have learned over the years that constructive feedback is beneficial, although at times I have taken things personally or have been discouraged. I have done some personal work to overcome this and can now appreciate the benefits of someone taking the time to offer feedback that will help me improve.*

*In terms of giving feedback, this is in area that I struggle with. I am getting better at letting others know if there is something that I feel is important to discuss based on the impact it is having on me; however, giving feedback to someone who is mentoring me or is in a supervisory role seems awkward to me. I am not sure what is expected in this regard and I am respectful of power dynamics that are present in each relationship. I am cautious to not step on someone's toes in this respect. (Danica Lee, personal communication, October 10, 2015)*

*Danica is working extremely efficiently. I find it very easy to be pleased with Danica as she meets my expectations. When I ask her*

*to do something she does it. Then when we speak again I can honestly think "nice work."*

*Danica is quick and ready to work. When I ask for something it is done and done well. I am also finding interacting with Danica exciting and rewarding. Danica has accepted the change of topic and seems to be pleased with improvising. I am also very conscious of making sure that she knows that I am pleased with her work. This is very important. I have to not only think the positive thought but also say them. I know sometimes my compliment comes out a bit stilted but because of this work I am at least saying them. This research is changing me. (John Poulsen, personal communication, October 12, 2015)*

## Respect

During the initial stages of building a relationship, respect for each other allowed the relationship to move forward. Respect for us was seated in a strong admiration for one another especially in the areas of intelligence, courage, and thoughtfulness. An opportunity to explore respect, relationships, and how cultural identities contribute to one's understanding of the world, creates space for discussion of values that may differ between parties. Absolon (2010) wrote, "We must respect who we are, what we know and where we come from" (p. 81). Knowing one another's stories can prevent future misunderstandings.

Faculty and students must also navigate the level of closeness or personal boundaries with each other and at times cultural norms may be different in this regard between both parties (Lechuga, 2011). The expectation that faculty and students should have clear boundaries with regard to relationships is one that is commonly held by many individuals and universities. Although this is typically ethically in place for the safety of either party, there are times when cultural considerations must be made and these boundaries must be explored. In sharing a personal experience of getting to know students outside of the classroom, Faith (2007) wrote that through sharing "our personal lives, a deep bond was established, a bond that transcended our differences" (p. 10). The space created for this type of sharing allowed for a new level of depth to develop in this relationship based on the foundation of great respect for one another.

*Because I am a counselling student, I've been thinking a lot about how respectful relationships between graduate assistants and faculty supervisors mirror, in a way, the therapeutic relationships with clients. Although the work that John and I are doing together is different than a therapeutic relationship, there are many similar elements and factors that help build that sense of*

*safety. From a foundational point of view, the therapeutic relationship is strengthened when clients know about their rights from the outset of therapy through an informed consent process. This is similar to when John and I completed the GA contract and agreement.*

*We were both on the same page with our responsibilities to one another and each week we negotiate that arrangement. Another element to building rapport in counselling settings that parallels relationship building in a faculty-student relationship is getting to know each other in casual ways. John and I had the chance to meet over a coffee and talk about a few things that ventured outside of the realm of our project focus. This allowed us to get to know each other a little better. Although a counsellor wouldn't meet with a client in a setting like that, it still represents that there are alternative ways to build rapport and invest in the relationship. Another way rapport is developed with clients is by positive regard and validation early on in the relationship. John has been very positive, encouraging, and optimistic about the work. I am hoping that this is building a sense of safety for both us of so that when it comes time for more constructive feedback there is a safety net and history of genuine validation and care. (Danica Lee, personal communication, October 27, 2015)*

*I'm not sure if there can be a positive relationship of any kind without respect. Respect seems basic to a good life. If I respect someone then I will have a greater chance of having something good happen between us. So it behooves me to be respectful so that more good things happen to me. Therefore it is an underpinning of making my life better. It is very easy to respect Danica as she is extremely responsible, intelligent, and easy to work with. (John Poulsen, personal communication, October 21, 2015)*

## Conclusion

An important part of our successful professional relationship has probably been the focus we put on examining our relationship. As we became cognizant of the literature we probably adapted ourselves to reflect what the literature indicated made successful partnerships. That we focused on feedback and respect as important elements in a healthy professional relationship probably says much about us as individuals. That is, through our professional relationship we have found that separately we value feedback and respect and worked to make sure that it was a part of our combined professional relationship. Professional relationships can be problematic but our experience is that if a dyad is respectful of one another and willing to engage in honest conversation (mutual feedback) then there

is a great chance of building a satisfying and supporting rapport.

*As a graduate assistant, I had a few choices to make throughout my work with my supervisor. I could have chosen to simply put my head down and do the work assigned or take the relationship one step further in order to get the most out of it. For me, this was an opportunity to connect with a mentor, a knowledge keeper, and someone with a lot of experience. By seeing this experience as an opportunity for both personal and professional growth, I was able to reflect on my own needs as well as possible contributions. Some of the key "take-away" points for students with similar opportunities are: everyone has something to give and receive, ask for feedback along the way (and be open to it), take risks in sharing your perspectives and thoughts, and make an effort to build connections that can help you in the future. (Danica Lee, personal communication, July 10, 2016)*

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# Reflective Dialogue

## The Emergence of Voice Through Invited Response

by Janet Youngdahl

*Janet is a vocal instructor in the Faculty of Fine Arts - Music. She has been conducting for the University of Lethbridge Singers since 2008.*

*"...the times they are a-changin'..." Bob Dylan*

The scores stacked on my piano give an indication of what music literature my studio voice students will be learning this semester: Handel, Schumann, Fauré, Copland, possibly Fanny Mendelssohn. Songs known for their enduring beauty; repertoire beloved by classical singers around the world. But for some of our students, learning these songs will require a dynamic alteration in their approach to learning, coupled with a deepened engagement in the learning process. If we can create learning environments that challenge students to build

their skills as reflective, autonomous learners, they can approach any new subject with confidence. The lessons learned in reflective practice within the arts may easily be transferred across subject disciplines in higher education.<sup>1</sup>

I am now a full generation removed from my students; I typed my first term papers from taped-together hand-written drafts, footnotes perilously dangling from paper clips. I listened to my LP record of Elly Ameling singing Schubert's *Shepherd on the Rock* so many times the grooves wore out. I went to university toting

years of classical musical study, ready to begin a new life centred around intensive vocal practice, rehearsals, and concerts, hoping to enter a world of performing, conducting, and researching music.

Although immersed in a sea of access to music, many voice majors now enter our program with only a vague notion of what it might mean to begin a serious study of music. For the most part, music literacy skills are simply lacking in our entering singers; many of them cannot sight read a simple melody from music notation, cannot identify key signatures, do not play the piano, and may never have attended a concert of classical music. When we assign them new songs, they simply put the iTunes recording on “repeat” on their headphones and binge watch a version of their assigned repertoire on YouTube. They have not yet developed a regular habit of musical practice; they may not know that music can be learned from a written score.

Sing it with me: “...the times they are a-changin’...”

How do we work successfully with students who enter with a desire to study advanced techniques without rudimentary skills? How do we create the right context for students to acquire skills they didn’t know they needed: skills that were traditionally taught through years of preparatory study? What questions initiate meaningful dialogue for a student who has not had the opportunity to learn to read music, has never heard operatic singing, has no familiarity with foreign languages but is pretty sure singing is their best subject?

The reality of the change has crept up slowly, but I have come to realize that I require much more precise information about each student so I can quickly identify their needs. I need to motivate them to work much harder than they have before so they can acquire musical skills at the same time that they develop their singing voice. It is crucial that they commit to a disciplined practice habit that will support frequent engagement with their instrument. Our work together needs to go beyond the traditional work on how to use their singing voice: beyond the issues of breathing and placement techniques, foreign-language diction, and musical style. A teaching style must be negotiated that is imbued with exactly the right challenge at the right moment: encouragement for the 10,000 hours of work ahead combined with the magic possibility of creating spectacular musical beauty.

### Initiating Reflective Dialogue

One strategy is to provide students with a nongraded exercise that they prepare in advance of their first voice lesson of the semester. This is sent to them a few days before our first scheduled meeting. It is an invaluable way to get to know new students, and with returning students,

it keeps their work focused on their own personal development: it keeps them thinking beyond grades. We sit down together and open up real dialogue about their hopes, fears, worries, dreams, and practical concerns about developing into a stronger musician. Doing this away from the music is crucial. Once a student is in the process of working through a song in the lesson setting, they may become guarded or defensive about their own skills; on some level they know there is a chasm between their vocal skills and the limited background they carry about musical scores and the theoretical knowledge underpinning music.

*How do we work successfully with students who enter with a desire to study advanced techniques without rudimentary skills?*

### Student Motivation and Working Style

The questions begin with a discussion about motivation. If I know what motivates a student, I can help them more effectively. Current research validates the function of an early conversation about motivation on university-student success.<sup>2</sup> Some students are helped by precise learning schedules or may be aided by the reward of working on literature they particularly admire. Others need deeply challenging repertoire to help them move beyond the surface of their craft to develop in a more artistic direction. Certain learners succeed better in very supportive, nondemanding lesson environments; others require highly challenging, interactive, fast-paced sessions to maintain their interest. Some of these issues can be teased out through the initial discussion questions, and I am sometimes surprised at the responses. Motivation is a crucial indicator of success in music learning, because of the extraordinary degree of perseverance required to develop technical and artistic mastery in music.<sup>3</sup> Increasingly, students realize that learning well together requires the development of an effective flow of meaningful communication, and their deeply committed involvement is a necessary part of the process. Knowing what motivates them helps me craft weekly lessons that maintain that spark of excitement in the process—offering the right amount of challenge and encouragement while building a growing love for the discipline of music.

### Goals and Inspiration

Continuing the conversation with a dialogue about goals and inspiration is one route

toward helping students identify their evolving professional identity. Learning to sing requires asking brave questions about processes that begin as unconscious activities: discovering expansive inhalation and efficient, engaged vocal delivery requires deep trust in both your teacher and yourself. Opening the dialogue while in discussion, away from the actual singing part of a voice lesson, can build connection and confidence early on. It also initiates a conversation that can demonstrate good listening between the teacher and the student. Ideally, a discussion of goals and inspiration will elicit an articulation about a student’s internal and external motivations toward their dreams as well as an indication of their current and future goals. If all of the goals were established by a parent or a former teacher it is a good time to guide the student toward attaining a more immediate and local task that might be achievable in the near future.<sup>4</sup> A wide-ranging discussion has an advantage: Johanna Peetz has studied the effect of both positive and negative discussion by university students about their future selves, and this elaboration is “predictive of the students’ sense of internal control, self-esteem, and positive outlook on the future.”<sup>5</sup>

*Working through a student’s goals can initiate an in-depth conversation that may encourage idealism tempered with reality and also helps to identify that “sweet spot” in the teaching relationship where a clear understanding of just how far to push and when to pull back keeps the coaching relationship vibrant and functional.*

Working through a student’s goals can initiate an in-depth conversation that may encourage idealism tempered with reality and also helps to identify that “sweet spot” in the teaching relationship where a clear understanding of just how far to push and when to pull back keeps the coaching relationship vibrant and functional. Voice teachers listen very carefully to the sounds a student is producing; students need to become comfortable and flexible listeners, carefully and unselfconsciously trying to put the teacher’s suggestions into practice. It helps inordinately if this pattern is initiated with conversation, and not confined to the vocal/technical realm of study.

## Challenge and Success

Engaging in a conversation about how a student deals with setbacks and challenges can provide some useful structure for building a long-term relationship. Knowing the challenges a student has overcome can begin a process where the student begins to notice that they hold personal strengths that will be important resources when they face future difficulties. Helping a student identify the members of their own support circle is important; it is critical that they do not view their instructor as their only life raft in a rocky sea, but instead find a way to gather information and guidance from the instructor in a way that acknowledges interdependence and maintains appropriate boundaries. Ideally, students need to accept a strong level of responsibility for their own development and must consider how to create a support system for their own development as musicians that utilizes the skills and strengths of the instructor as part of an ongoing mentoring process, not merely a close friendship.

## Journaling as Ongoing Dialogue

Requiring students to keep a journal as both a place for reflection and a concrete record of their daily practice has several advantages. A weekly glance at the journal indicates the student's steady engagement in the learning process; it allows regular discussion about establishing sequential, disciplined practice as an artist. Audrey Beaumont has documented that journaling can move students from passive involvement into more active engagement: students who lack significant threshold concepts may not articulate this verbally, but they may feel comfortable writing down their concerns in a journal.<sup>6</sup> Part of the challenge in working with students new to music study is involving them in repeated interaction with musical compositions in various ways: beyond the precise acquisition of the score's requirements. They need to pursue a detailed examination of the text, translation, and pronunciation as well as understanding the style of the work, leading to confident memorization and

performance. Creative involvement with their repertoire in the journal can include making their own poetic translations, commenting on recorded performances of the work and nitty-gritty details about their struggles with difficult aspects of the piece. A requirement to include at least one drawing or painting about their repertoire has proven to be particularly popular--some students create an illustration of every piece they learn.

## Validating Musical Literacy

Convincing students that musical literacy is necessary can be difficult. In a world where nearly every piece of written music exists in a recorded or filmed version, it can be hard for students to see the value of written musical scores. They may have significant resistance to the whole concept of written music if they previously learned music by ear or by rote. Given the fact that music often attracts aural learners, you can begin to imagine the difficulty faced by a student who enters university to study music feeling like a skilled music learner, but who soon discovers that the first thing they need to succeed in the field is to develop more visually based music-literacy skills. Reading musical scores may seem like an insurmountable challenge to a student who is very skilled in echoing or copying what they hear; they may need significant convincing about the value of the printed musical score.

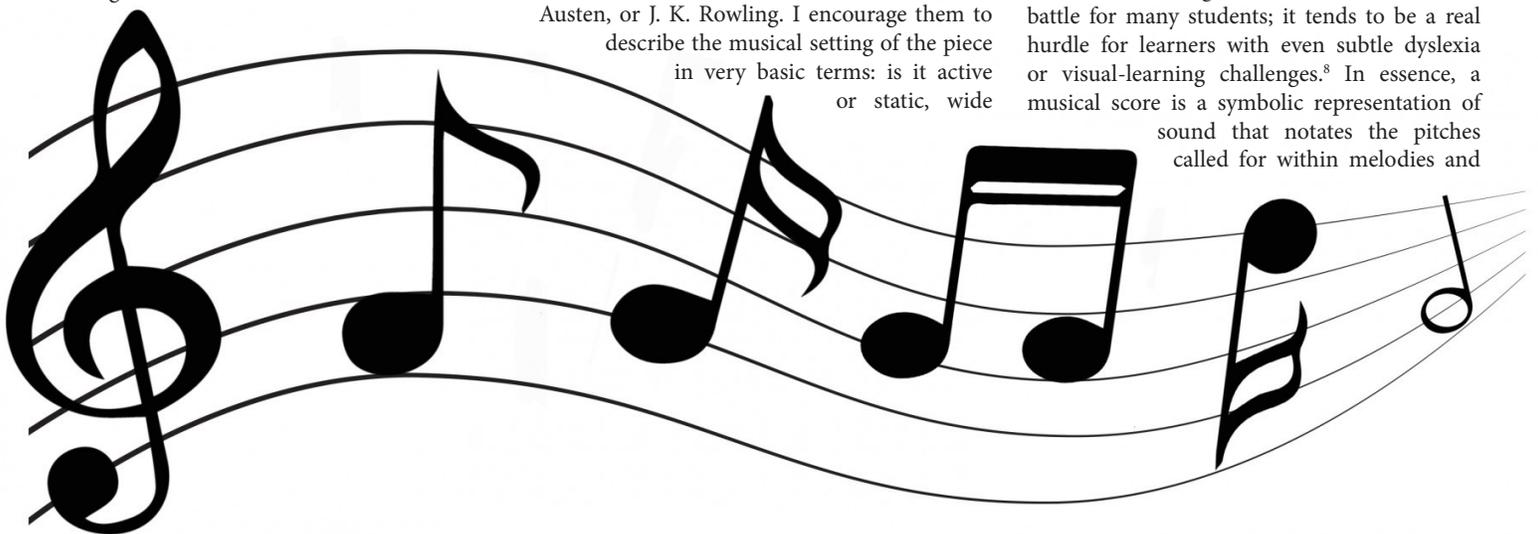
As an early activity as part of a studio lesson, I ask a student to show me how they learn a new piece of music. I offer them a score they haven't seen before. I ask them to use my office as their own practice room and to show me what they would do to learn the music before ever listening to a recording of it. I ask them to look at the score and describe its attributes; I have them identify the basic characteristics of the piece using just their eyes at first, challenging them to recognize that vocal music is a text representing a particular era and style and that they already have the capability to discuss many of its features in the same way that they would be able to describe if a book was likely Shakespeare, Austen, or J. K. Rowling. I encourage them to describe the musical setting of the piece in very basic terms: is it active or static, wide

ranging, conventional or contemporary? I ask them to identify a small part of the piece that they think they currently have the skills to understand. I ask them to begin learning that section, and I observe their process.

*Convincing students that musical literacy is necessary can be difficult.*

If I encounter a student who is too uncomfortable showing me their own work habits, I don't initially push this. I demonstrate my own approach to learning new music. I show the student that clapping rhythms and writing in tricky intervals and even a one-finger piano approach to playing their melody gets them far along the path of learning a new song. I try to reduce the fear they have about learning new repertoire, likening various songs to different pictures in a colouring book, helping them see that music notation is at its core merely meaningful shape, direction, and speed. In the case of real discomfort with the written musical score, I ask the student to come and look at the score carefully with me, and I show them an example of improvising a melody in the style of the written score, using elements of the score to allow the student to engage with the material in a less directed way. My goal is to help them view the music as an interesting document, and encourage them to guess what the score might sound like. On some level, becoming literate in art song is a highly transferrable detective skill; it means you are someone who can look at an unfamiliar technical document in a foreign language and use every skill at your disposal to discover how to make it comprehensible.<sup>7</sup>

Music reading is a skill that develops slowly in most people. It is easiest to teach when students are young, when repetition and repeated presentation of material is a more usual part of education. Reading musical scores is a difficult battle for many students; it tends to be a real hurdle for learners with even subtle dyslexia or visual-learning challenges.<sup>8</sup> In essence, a musical score is a symbolic representation of sound that notates the pitches called for within melodies and



harmonies as well as a scheme suggesting the duration of the pitches in an organized rhythmic pattern. For singers, musical scores also transmit texts (often in foreign languages) and require dramatic engagement as well as an understanding of overarching effects like tempo, dynamics, and stylistic approaches. For generations, it has been assumed that someone who studies music at the post-secondary level has already acquired music literacy. This is no longer true, and part of getting to know a music student involves learning about their particular level of music literacy. The development of a basic criteria for evaluation of music literacy skills is essential, and as part of the initial discussion questions for students I now include a section addressing a vocal sight-reading inventory, so the skills a music student needs are reliably assessed.<sup>9</sup>

### The Power of Small Group Settings

Every other week, the students in music studio gather for a two-hour repertoire class to perform for one another. This is their opportunity to try out new pieces and styles, to check their memory of new works and to display mastery of new techniques in a small group setting. It is also an ideal setting for building community and to practice giving and receiving appropriate comments. I work hard to establish the tone in these classes, aiming for an atmosphere where students feel valued and challenged. A pattern is established where each student performs one piece followed by every other student in the course offering a brief comment before I make any suggestions to the performer. These sessions become much more functional throughout the semester as students gain experience in listening to one another; the sessions have demonstrable positive impact on student confidence, as seen through course assessment. I have used the “dialogic principals” from the Teaching-Learning Academy at Western Washington University to develop the essential attributes for these sessions, noted as “collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful.”<sup>10</sup>

In the small group setting, students tend to share openly with one another; major technical gains are frequently made within the repertoire-class setting. Students develop strong friendships and learn to trust one another, often urging their colleagues to take important technical steps that feel risky to performers. In the repertoire classes, I see the fruit of having created constructive individual dialogue patterns with each student; they demonstrate their competency in dialogue and discussion rather than through debate and destructive criticism. Creating an atmosphere that is collegial rather than openly competitive remains a distinctive goal for these sessions.

### Develop Individual Strategies

Dropping old assumptions about the level of musical preparedness in post-secondary

music students has been difficult. Musicians pride themselves on holding high standards and have a reassuringly unified view of what constitutes strong musical skills. In a changing climate where students may choose to pursue a field they only recently discovered, our task as educators has shifted, probably for the better, because we can accommodate a much broader cross-section of students. There is a distinct need to create individual strategies that respond to the particular strengths and needs of each student. I am increasingly moved by the number of auditioning students who identify music as their passion because “it saved my life.” Music has a function in society well beyond artistic perfection; it carries the ability to narrate our life stories and to elevate our moods and response to life. Working with students who have identified music as their needful pursuit is a privilege, and the opportunity to work one-on-one with students is an extraordinary gift in the realm of higher education. To teach a broad range of skills effectively within the studio environment means to have a deep and precise understanding of each individual student, tracing their background and tracking their development so they come out with a music degree and the highest possible skills combined with an indefatigable love for the discipline of music.

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# EDTALKS

conversations in education



# Teaching Tips to Enhance the use of Discussion Forums

by Dawn Lorraine McBride

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## Overview

In this paper I describe a variety of teaching strategies to encourage active student participation in online discussion forums while being cognizant of not increasing the workload for instructors. Three prominent themes emerge that include the need to establish a well-organized, supportive online learning environment within

the first two weeks of the course; to empower the students to design, elicit, and monitor their discussion forum postings; and to ensure instructors have an active online presence, facilitating rather than leading the forum discussions, whenever possible.

A common e-learning resource is a web-based discussion forum (DF) where class discussion occurs online with the stated expectation that everyone participates, often asynchronously, in a predefined period of time. In addition, students may earn grades for the frequency and quality of their posts by answering a set of questions and replying to their peers' answers. The success of online dialogue is often dependent on ample student participation and the instructor's active online presence (Salmon, 2002). To this end, I will describe a variety of generic introductory activities that may be used in a variety of scholarly disciplines to foster an online community of engaged learners and to help students gain confidence and competence when participating in discussion forums. The activities can be easily incorporated into lesson plans. If desired, the instructor could adapt the relevant warm-up activities into a series of mini-assignments where students earn a course participation grade.

Overall, the focus in the first half of the paper is on how to prepare students for working online while the remainder of the paper contains descriptions of multiple strategies to promote online interaction. Many of these ideas come from having taught online for over 10 years (see McBride & Davis, 2009).

## The First Two Weeks of the Course

The following five themed activities, which occur ideally in the first two weeks of the course, introduce students to using discussion forums and to the expectations for their posts. These activities are mainly ungraded or may be used as ways for students to gain participation points. They are not specific to online learning and can be used in other learning formats such as face-to-face, videoconferences, or independent study. As they are not labour-intensive to set up, there is more time available for the instructor to facilitate the online discussions.

### Present and Discuss

For students to gain an appreciation of the ebb and flow of online discussions, offer them an excerpt, in PDF format, of a completed DF from a past course (seek permission from the past online participants to share their posts). To help

students understand the asynchronous nature of a forum, highlight the various times when posts were made. In addition, draw the students' attention to how discussion threads work and the types of posts students make. These include but are not limited to (a) questions, (b) core replies to an instructor's question (the student's direct answer), (c) replies to fellow students, and (d) cheerleading posts consisting of supportive comments that reinforce participation but lack substance such as "good point you made, thanks." Further, to show students how forums can be active tools in their learning process include an additional handout that describes the course's community-building forums such as (a) a forum where students introduce themselves; (b) a forum, known as the water cooler, to post noncourse material that promotes social connections among classmates such as a movie review, requests for a study partner, and so forth; (c) a Q & A forum, that the instructor monitors daily, for questions related to the course and assignments; and (d) an announcement forum that lists all of the course's updates, refinements, and changes.

Another highly successful introductory activity that helps students gain competence in posting online is to invite them to analyze a few mock posts that are of poor quality—for example, they are long and rambling, have meaningless subject headings, contain grammar and spelling errors, contain plagiarized material, or have an arrogant style. As a group assignment, I ask students to identify the weaknesses in these posts, to explain the consequences of making a weak post (e.g., poor grade, the author of the post feeling ignored as it is skipped over by classmates), and to suggest how to make the posts more engaging to read and of higher quality. Once the students see the disadvantages of making poor quality posts, it is productive to introduce, or review, the expectations for forum participation including the quality and quantity of posts (Brooke, 2006; McBride & Davis, 2009).

One of my favourite activities for students taking a blended learning course, and who are new to online learning, is to host a live, synchronous, informal online discussion forum in the classroom for a brief period (e.g., 15 minutes). This portion of the class is conducted in silence, except to ask technology-related questions, since this task represents a typical online experience. During this time, each student makes a core post that answers the main question, replies to a classmate's core post, and makes one cheerleading post. Afterward, I debrief with the students about what worked well and what needs to happen when they start using the forums.

### Nurture the Social Presence

To promote interaction among students in a course, I recommend instructors spend time building peer visibility and promoting social

connections among the students during the first two weeks. Building an online learning community serves as an incentive for students to log onto the course more often. Also, students may feel supported by their peers, thereby allowing them to take learning risks in their posts. Furthermore, these activities reduce the perceived social distance between instructors and students, which research has repeatedly shown to be related to students making more posts (Ng, Cheung, & Hew, 2012) and strongly correlated to course satisfaction (Andresen, 2009).

Some of these strategies include using fun *e-tivities* (Salmon, 2002) and hosting a “who are you?” forum where students introduce themselves. In terms of the latter, I supply a list of 10 introductory-type questions and ask students to post their answers to two or more questions of their choice. I direct students to make their posts engaging for others to read (e.g., use an informative subject line, use headings, effective colours, be succinct). To nurture the online community, I regularly encourage students to update their introductions throughout the course with pictures and announcements (e.g., engagements, births).

### Be Online Daily, Coaching

Early in the course, instructors would be wise to adhere to the well-known belief that immediate, respectful, and constructive feedback maintains on-task behaviour and increases the quality of output. Thus, it is important to offer students early and ample reinforcement for authoring good quality posts. As a result, in the initial weeks I will make daily posts highlighting what worked well in the forums for that day and offering a generic suggestion to enhance the quality of the posts. I will also publicly thank, in the beginning, those who are contributing to developing an engaging learning community by being involved in the optional forums and offering supportive comments to their peers. I also like to acknowledge the first student to post in each new forum week, as this means to me that this person likely has good time-management skills to be prepared to post an answer before anyone else. For instance, I might write “Peter, it is great to have you start us off this week by making a post that is between 100-200 words and ends with a question to engage others. I am curious to see who joins the debate you initiated.” As the students become more engaged with their online classmates and display more critical thinking about the course material, I gradually reduce my coaching role.

### Check-In

During the critical first weeks, I recommend instructors pay close attention to those students who appear to be struggling with meeting the quality or quantity requirements for posting. I advise against publicly posting corrective

feedback to such students to protect them from feeling any sense of humiliation or fear associated with being corrected in front of their peers. Instead, contact these students privately by phone or by e-mail. During these check-in contacts, I often discover students who are struggling with the technology or are overwhelmed with trying to manage the online course demands and their other life responsibilities. In this scenario, this brief student-to-instructor contact, with some mentoring and referrals, can assist in reducing the student’s stressors and increase the possibility the student will not withdraw early from the course (for more information about managing student stress in an online forum, please see Gerlock & McBride, 2013).

### Provide Graded Feedback

Another instructor action to help students meet the expectations associated with the quantity and quality of posts is to provide them with individualized feedback on their first two weeks of posts. To make the process efficient, I highlight on our program’s rubric (see McBride & Shepard, 2010) what expectations the student met. Each post is not marked but rather the overall performance is evaluated for quantity and quality. For example, to score well for quantity students must demonstrate that their: (a) core posts were made by midweek; (b) two reply posts, at minimum, were made over a three-day period; (c) posts were limited to 200 words; (d) posts adhered to APA standard for writing, and (e) posts included cheerleading and/or information-sharing themed posts. In terms of the quality, students must author posts where core constructs from the lesson are accurately described and evaluated.

After this period of intense marking, I initiate the student self-evaluation process. Students submit, for grading, a two-page assessment of their weekly posting performance that includes (a) tracking their frequency of cheerleading posts, core posts, and replies to their peers; (b) sharing a post they are proudest of and why; (c) briefly noting a posting goal they have to maintain or increase their quality and quantity of online participation; and (d) describing what they like and find challenging so far in the course. I also ask them to note if they are having any technology problems. I like reading these graded reflections as it helps me to stay tuned to the students’ needs, interests, and concerns given I lack face-to-face interaction in an online learning environment. To make the marking efficient, I often create a customized template for the self-evaluation (e.g., fill in the blank sentences, text boxes that limit the number of words permitted). I aim to return these student-authored assessments within 48 hours so the students can apply the feedback immediately to their current postings. With seasoned e-students, for example those who are regularly meeting the forum expectations, I will phase

out the use of this weekly self-reflection and, instead, randomly select a handful of remaining weeks for self-assessment (the students do not know these weeks in advance). However, I will always mark the first two weeks of posts so the students, no matter how experienced they are in forum work, will quickly become accustomed to the expectations for participating in my online courses.

### Post Good DF Questions

To promote frequent student interaction within the DFs and to build knowledge, it is vital that instructors generate questions that require reflective responses containing critical analysis and that promote an exchange of ideas rather than posting questions to which students can post a single factual, correct, or obvious answer (University of Alaska, Academic Technology Services, 2003). In our program, instructors usually ask three forum questions per week related to the three- to six-hour self-directed online lesson. The work of Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1997) described a five-phase model that instructors can use to design meaningful online questions based on the rate students are demonstrating knowledge development. Brooke (2006) and Andresen (2009) offered additional pedagogical insights when constructing forum questions.

Some of the generic questions I tend to build upon in my forums include: (a) What are two things that most stood out for you in the reading? Why?, (b) What theme in the reading had the most impact on x? Why?, (c) If this research occurred in x (years ago, a different setting, etc.) how might the results differ?, and (d) Analyze one theme in the reading from the perspective of a certain theorist (e.g., Freud) or person (e.g., a person of minority).

### Promote Interactions

#### Use Structuring Skills

Instructors can specify when certain posts need to be made to prevent *cluster posting*, that is, a student making all the required posts in one day, usually on the last day, which limits the amount of dialogue that may occur in the forum. In the program in which I teach, instructors require all students to make their core replies for each question by the third day of the posting week (i.e., Wednesdays to Sundays). The reply posts, a minimum of two per online question, contain at least one reply posted on the weekend. Cheerleading posts are welcome anytime during the posting week. In addition, to encourage a variety of answers, it can be useful to specify that one cannot repeat a classmate’s answer. This structuring tactic serves as an incentive to post early in the week to lessen the chance a student has the same answer and requires students to

read the posts made before they craft their answers.

It is very useful to ask students to end their core answer with a comment or question designed to spark discussion with one or more classmates. This helps the forums to fill quickly with a variety of debates and discussions. It also teaches students how to ask good forum questions, as poorly worded questions may fail to get a peer reply. In order to encourage a more interactive atmosphere, instruct students to respond to a peer's unanswered question rather than adding another response to a question that has already been answered.

### Teach Facilitation Skills

To ask students to interact with their peers requires a set of communication skills that may be new or underdeveloped. Online instructors are in a prime position to model and teach numerous facilitation skills, such as those described by Ng, Cheung, and Hew (2012). These skills can be embedded in the discussion forum rubric or listed as an expectation for a particular posting week. For example, the instructor might ask the students to write a post that respectfully challenges a classmate's opinion by offering an alternative viewpoint or identifying a discrepancy.

### Offer a Variety of Tasks

To continue to promote the students' responsibility for their learning and to break the momentum of instructor-authored online questions, I often invite students to become the leader of the week. For this activity, students in this role do not answer the required questions, though they are still expected to study the material. Instead, they assume the responsibility to (a) create the DF questions (which are approved by the instructor in advance), (b) be active in the forums every day by reinforcing good posts and asking follow-up questions when the forum lags, (c) respectfully remind late posters via e-mail to post (with a cc to the instructor), and (d) post the integrative summary for each question at the closing of the forum. It has been my experience that the leader of the week role is a welcome opportunity for most students despite the extra work of monitoring and facilitating the forums. A variation on this exercise is to have students each adopt one of the previously mentioned responsibilities, or to rotate the roles among a

small group of students for a week. For example, after a class presentation (online or face-to-face), the presenters host a debriefing forum assuming one or more of the aforementioned facilitator roles.

As a change from the traditional Q & A format in DFs, and to renew the student energy that may lag midterm, I orchestrate de Bono's (1999) six-hat activity. Students are assigned or choose one of the six perspectives (hats) and focus their posts from their assigned perspective. For example, the student with the yellow hat needs to write posts that highlight the strengths and value of the studied concept whereas the student assigned the black hat argues the opposite perspective. Options to facilitate this activity including subgrouping the hats (e.g., same colour, selected mix colours together). A concluding activity is to ask the students to reflect on how their hat limited or enhanced their learning and what hat would they want to wear in future analyses of course material. For more information on how to use the six-hat approach in a classroom (which can be easily adapted to online learning), please refer to Rizvi, Bilal, Ghaffar, and Asdaque (2011).

To continue to promote interaction when working online, I will occasionally, perhaps once per term, host the Talk Don't Text for a Week! forum. In this activity, students do not type their post but rather make their posts verbally using voice board software. It seems to work best if the verbal posts are less than 30 seconds to keep the listener interested, and the same posting criteria are followed. I tend to use this strategy near the end of the 13-week term when students are finding online learning a bit monotonous.

My last suggested activity that is focused on increasing interaction among e-students is structured around having students analyze case studies in a variety of ways, as described by Brooke (2006). Options for instructors include hosting a mock trial, creating debate teams, or presenting scenarios that require students to demonstrate decision-making and problem-solving skills. This activity, as are others mentioned in this section, is heavily dependent on peer facilitation, which can reduce the workload for instructors. Peer facilitation can be very successful if instructors adhere to the recommendations in this article, around posting expectations and building community online, and follow the peer facilitation techniques recommendations offered by Ng et al. (2012).

### Conclusion

I have repeatedly discovered that the more time I invest in creating an engaging online learning space, clearly outlining what I expect in terms of participation, and providing frequent strength-

based feedback early in the course, the more often the number of posts in my courses far exceeds the minimum number required and the higher the grades are for quality posts. Teaching the students how to enhance their own posts as well as to elicit and amplify their classmates' answers and ideas allows me, as the instructor, to become an attentive facilitator and invites students to self-direct their own learning.

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# Should we have Capstone Courses in Arts & Science

by Jennifer Mather

*Jennifer is a Professor in the Department of Psychology, and a former Teaching Centre Fellow.*

## Where does the concept come from?

In the early 1990s, scholars recognized that elite American universities, often described as “research universities,” emphasized graduate teaching and research to a considerable extent. This has not really changed. Undergraduate students in fact paid the tuition that substantially supported the enterprise but were shortchanged, and “get less than their money’s worth” (Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 14). Thus the Commission was formed in 1995 to look into how to better educate the undergraduate students. Of several recommendations, number VI was that students should have a capstone course, a culminating experience that would draw on the skills and knowledge of the earlier years, result in a major project, be carried out in collaborative groups, and hopefully bridge across disciplines.

Recommendations are easier to make than to carry out. Katkin (2003) noted five years later that research universities had indeed tried to carry out some of the recommendations of the report. In particular, universities had increased the participation of undergraduates in research, though mainly for the sciences. Inclusion of a capstone experience was far less common. Capstones have to be constructed at the departmental level, so while most schools reported that a capstone was required in “some” majors and programs, only 5% reported that they were required in all. Honours programs were far more common, but they only reach a few elite students. Programs that must be constructed at the departmental level but require faculty-wide or even university-wide cooperation are hard to produce.

At the same time, the capstone was being discussed in the social sciences. As part of a reaction to the “decay” of scholarship in the 1980s, the Association of American Colleges reported on ways to strengthen liberal education (Wagenaar, 1993). They focused on the major and pointed out that it should have a beginning or introductory course, a middle set of more specialized courses, and an end (a capstone). Wagenaar (1993) invited teachers who taught such a course to a panel presentation at the



North Central Sociological Association and summed up their reports. Many sociologists thought that synthesis and application happened in their regular courses, although they did not. Some believed that the methods course was the capstone experience, but these had depth but no breadth. Others felt a theory course would do so, although it consisted of reviewing the major theorists. Wagenaar felt a capstone should be a seminar course, best taught by more than one teacher and with minimal lecturing. Some instructors used a social-problems approach, others used books that surveyed the major. Assignments could include reflective journals, writing “What if” papers, and having early drafts of papers critiqued.

Why should students have such a course? Committing yourself to a major means taking at least 13 courses out of 40 within this world view, and often it's much nearer 20. That's half of the courses a student takes. It makes sense to give that student a chance at the end of his or her education to sum up what this area is about. In addition, with such large classes, it's almost vital to give individual students a chance to think through their ideas, to present them both in writing and orally. And since most of our students will not continue in academia, we owe it to them to let them see how these ideas will play out in the “real world.”

*Committing yourself to a major means taking at least 13 courses out of 40 within this world view, and often it's much nearer 20. That's half of the courses a student takes. It makes sense to give that student a chance at the end of his or her education to sum up what this area is about.*

### What are some examples?

Durel (1993), writing about the same recommendations, suggested the capstone should be a “rite of passage” both integrating a body of knowledge and critically evaluating it. He saw it as bridging between the role of student and that of critical citizen, showing their knowledge of the theoretical work but also its possible application. His course included

an overview of this scholarly work, a review of major theories, and a linkage to future roles of informed and active citizen or graduate student. Class participants wrote and formally presented a thesis, and were evaluated on the major field exam. Berheide (2007) points out that this is also a good way to assess how the department is doing in educating the majors, integrating guest speakers, presenting research studies or career options, as well as participating in campus activities.

Brooks, Benton-Kupper, and Slayton (2004) report how Millikin University developed a curriculum with three common threads: student-learning goals; core questions, values, and means; and proficiencies. They designed a university capstone course with two components, reflection and contribution. Students had to complete a personal development plan, and then gather information to assist them in carrying out the plan. For the contribution component, students gathered in teams to complete a multidisciplinary project that was part of the course's overriding theme. A questionnaire about learning goals showed that students gained collaborative and leadership skills from the course, as well as clarifying personal values, understanding social justice, and developing personal identity.

Hauhart and Grahe (2010) asked sociology and psychology departments in the western United States about capstone courses. Of the 95 respondents who answered, 58 offered a capstone course, but how a capstone course was structured varied widely. Most (83% and 85%) reported that they wanted students to integrate learned material and extend and apply it. Just over half saw it as integrating theoretical work across the field, and as a bridge to graduate study. Only 44% believed it made students better “consumers of knowledge” and around a quarter saw it as educating students as citizens. Elements of these courses also varied widely: 95% had a research paper; 88% to a specific style, presumably APA format; 84% used instructor-led discussion; 69% oral presentation; and 66% a major project. When faculty were asked what worked well, they talked about integrated and cooperative learning, and students completing self-directed work. The biggest problem that faculty saw was students' approach, because many had never done anything like this before or were more focused on practical than intellectual issues. Still, 90% of faculty felt it had some or great value.

### Why I chose a capstone-style course

Students taking the psychology major are only required to take one 4000-level course. As many of them do no more than one, the department expects these courses to be challenging. I chose the topic of schizophrenia, Psychology 4550. This common illness (1/100 people) needs to

be understood from many different directions, all the way from neural development through thinking to ethics and community, so coverage of it needed breadth. Students need to develop communication skills, so they chose one of these topics to present for a whole 75-minute class and another unrelated area to write a 15-plus page paper. Most of our majors do not continue to graduate school but rather work in the helping professions, so I chose to link with the Schizophrenia Society to give them real-world experience with people who were struggling with the disorder. Most of all, I felt that they needed to move toward self-directed learning. This does not include exams. They chose their own weighting for the four aspects of the course—presentation, essay, reflective journal, and review of chapters of the text, though of course we worked out limits. During the course I gave them feedback but no numerical evaluation, and all assignments and anything extra were assembled into a portfolio for evaluation at the end of the semester. One entry in the journal was to result from talking with an individual with schizophrenia, and the final one was expected to be a self-evaluation. Students reported initial trepidation about the oral presentation but pleasure at accomplishing it, and gratitude for a change from the usual competitive classroom to a collaborative one.

### What departments in Arts & Sciences offer capstone courses?

An e-mail from the Dean's Office located four examples. The demands varied by area, though all required individual inquiry. Physics 3750 focused on breadth and student inquiry. A colloquium series produced speakers, and students were required to ask questions and given a quiz on the presentations; they produced a written report and oral presentation on two of these presentations. In addition they had problem assignments and had to do one short and one long oral presentation. There were several offerings of Chemistry 4000; I chose one that seemed to fit the capstone requirements best. Students had weekly short assignments, but their major effort was a project, divided across the semester into four components: problem selection, preliminary report, final written report, and oral presentation of the project. Religious Studies 4000, the only one required of all majors, produced an overview of major religions and focused on communication. Students led discussion, did a weekly appraisal of readings, and wrote a 1,500-word paper on a theory. Most of all, they wrote a 3,000-word presentation on a cross-religion theme and presented it to the class. Liberal Education 4000 focused on four books with divergent but inclusive themes. Students co-led two discussions, wrote four discussion papers (one per book) and wrote a cross-book critical synthesis paper.

As Hauhart and Grahe (2010) found for psychology and sociology, capstone courses varied in their curriculum. All of them centered on active learning, as exams or tests were at most a minor component of the graded work. They also demanded communication skills—writing and critical evaluation and oral presentation of one’s ideas. Research papers were a common outcome in our courses, as were 95% of the surveyed courses. Oral presentation was an aspect of all our courses, though only 69% of the surveyed ones. The chemistry course focused most on depth via a major project, as did 66% of the surveyed courses, while the physics course went for breadth, seen in 59% of those surveyed. Only the psychology course reached beyond the academic setting out to the community, and no course had the self-evaluation component of the Millikin course (Brooks et al. 2004).

### Should we all do this course, and should we require it?

Students often suffer from a “fourth-year letdown.” They have worked hard, completed at least a lot of courses in a focused area and some more or less useful GLER requirements. Yet they often feel vaguely uneasy, neither sure of what their academic career has been about nor aware of where it will take them. A capstone could focus where they have come from and direct them to a career ahead. As such it could be the keystone of the bridge between the naïveté of the beginning student to the knowledge and use of skills along the road ahead after graduation.

How would a department develop a capstone course? Ideally, it would come as part of a self-evaluation, when members were figuring out “who we are” as well as “what we want to teach.” Such self-evaluation needs to be carried out fairly frequently, as new faculty bring new ideas and a departmental teaching philosophy makes just as much sense as an individual one. There are two easy routes to a capstone. One is for an individual to develop a course that acts as a capstone and for the department to recognize its value and incorporate it; Psychology 4550 would fit into this model. A second route is to move from a department seminar, with presentations by members and visitors, to a more critical student-centered one like Physics 3750. Should a capstone course be mandatory? In the Spark: 2016 Teaching Symposium workshop, all participants, drawn widely across faculties, felt that it should be. Could the Dean say, “Go make a capstone course” to departments? Definitely, but it is unlikely that he or she would specify in any way what it should look like.

One question is whether all departments would produce a similar capstone. In substance, this seems unlikely. Yet the commonalities of the described courses—self-directed learning, oral and written communication, a mixture of breadth and depth, and a focus on “who we are

and what we know”—are not discipline-specific. Another question that needs to be answered by departments who design a capstone course is whether it should incorporate some community-based practical learning. That might depend on the department—local history or geography are obvious, philosophy and English less so. Yet a course that builds bridges to the community is also building bridges to life after graduation, and not every student will take applied studies courses or a co-op semester.

Some of the problems that face a department wanting, or being told to want, a capstone are administrative. Who should teach it, seasoned senior faculty or new ones with bright new ideas? What happens if the format is non-standard? Wrangling at the Curriculum Committee level. How about shared courses? Discussions arise about who gets credit, and part credit for teaching is often just not given. If it is required, are there enough faculty members to teach it? Fourth-year courses are often seen as a reward, to teach something you know really well. If a capstone is required, this might be “the” fourth-year course. Can we switch from person to person? The capstone would be a course, and its design might take more effort than that of other courses, so switching it around to different individuals would be exhausting for them.

Can we do it? Of course we can. It requires effort and time allocation, and probably the explicit support of the Dean for doing the extra work. Making it part of a departmental self-evaluation is logical. We already have models from several departments, so we can see directions to go, though it requires that first we look at ourselves and what we believe in. It takes a lot of work, but our students deserve no less.

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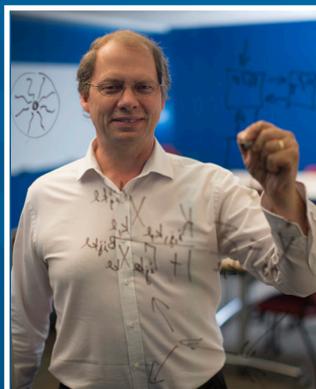
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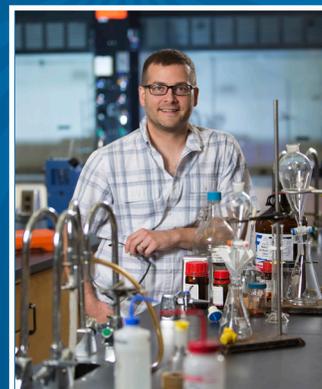
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