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TEACHING & LEARNING AT MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY
THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PURDY CRAWFORD TEACHING CENTRE

September is upon us . . . and the new academic year beckons us to consider new options, to eschew past practices that had disappointing outcomes, and to find that elusive Holy Grail: more time! September also ushers in that venerable tradition—the list. For example, we have the annual Beloit College Mindset List (<http://www.beloit.edu/mindset/2015/>) which generally makes me despair. This year, for example, it says about the 2011 incoming class:

- Their school’s “blackboards” have always been getting smarter.
- As they’ve grown up on websites and cell phones, adult experts have constantly fretted about their alleged deficits of empathy and concentration.

There are other lists, too, whose goal is to provide a framework for the improvement of undergraduate education. The most famous and oft-quoted of these is arguably Chickering and Gamson’s *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (AAHE, 1987). Based on 50 years’ worth of research into teaching and learning, these principles say that good practice:

1. **Encourages contact between students and faculty**
2. **Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students**
3. **Encourages active learning**
4. **Gives prompt feedback**
5. **Emphasizes time on task**
6. **Communicates high expectations**
7. **Respects diverse talents and ways of learning**

Chickering and Gamson believe, “An undergraduate education should prepare students to understand and deal intelligently with modern life.” Their Seven Principles emphasize six important characteristics of effective teaching and learning across all disciplines: activity, expectations, cooperation, interaction, diversity, and responsibility. The following pages offer a few tips for implementing the Seven Principles.

1. Good Practice encourages contact between students and faculty

Frequent contact with professors in and out of class is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Knowing that their professors are interested in and concerned about them helps students cope with and succeed in difficult tasks and stay committed. Evidence also suggests that establishing good rapport with their professors encourages students to reflect on their future plans.



2. Good Practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students

“Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated,” say Chickering and Gamson. Professors can implement this practice by designing opportunities for students to work with others in formal or informal ways, sharing their own ideas with a group or peer, and responding to others’ ideas. Thus, students also develop their communication skills and can benefit from enriched understanding as they coach, discuss, and learn from each other.

3. Good Practice encourages active learning

How often have you heard, or opined yourself, that “learning is not a spectator sport.” When Chickering and Gamson coined this mantra, they meant that learning is more than rote memorization. Students must reflect on what they are learning, connect it to their already acquired knowledge or past experiences, and make it meaningful in their daily lives. It is for these reasons that experiential learning—that is, learning that asks students to grapple with real-life issues in authentic situations—results in deeper, more lasting learning outcomes.

What is learning anyway?

Peggy Maki (2004) reminds us that learning in any discipline or field is a complex and dynamic process, much more than the mere accumulation of course credits. She describes learning as a “process of constructing meaning, framing issues, drawing on strategies and abilities honed over time, re-conceptualizing understanding, repositioning oneself in relation to a problem or issue, and connecting thinking and knowing to action” (p. 32).

4. Good Practice gives prompt feedback

Students need timely feedback, especially early in the term. Frequent opportunities to perform, practice, and then receive formative comments help students to improve. So giving more short assignments, and spacing them out, may allow you to pace your grading and give prompter, more useful feedback. Students also need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to find out, and how to assess themselves. See, for example, the sample writing assignments at the end of this section designed to do just that.

5. Good Practice emphasizes time on task

Chickering and Gamson say there is no substitute for using time well, yet many students need help in learning effective time management. They have to budget a realistic amount of time for their learning tasks and realize, usually by experience, that last-minute frenzy does not result in learning (let alone a good product). Professors can help by scheduling assignments and tasks mindfully—to preserve their own, as much as their students’, sanity and quality of work.

6. Good Practice communicates high expectations

High expectations are important for everyone, say Chickering and Gamson. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and they make extra efforts to fulfill expectations.

7. Good Practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning

There are many pathways to learning. Students bring different skills, knowledge, values, habits of mind, and learning styles to the classroom, lab, and studio. Talk about learning styles to familiarize students with their own preferences—and then encourage them to experiment with new approaches that will expand their repertoire of learning techniques. (Try the respected VARK learning styles inventory at <http://www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp>)

References

- Chickering, A. W. & Gamson, Z.F. (March 1987). Seven principles for good practice. *The American Association for Higher Education Bulletin*. AAHE.
- Fleming, N. *VAR K: A guide to learning styles*. <http://www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp>
Accessed August 26, 2011.
- Maki, P. (2004). *Assessing for learning: Building a sustainable commitment across the institution*. Sterling, VA: Stylus/AAHE.

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Writing Assignments to Encourage Reflection and Formative Feedback

Here are a few suggestions for short, reflective assignments that overcome two common problems:

1. Students don't read your comments (or know how to enact them).
2. Students generally don't revisit an assignment to learn from it – even if they rewrite, they don't often reflect on what they learned from the process.

Strategy One: Letter Writing

This is a real-life activity that encourages personal connection with the material, is short, and offers a wide array of possibilities. For example, ask students to write one of the following:

- Complaint to X about the inflexibility of his theories
- Congratulations to X about his discovery, new book, Nobel prize
- Publisher's rejection letter to the author of class textbook (or one of the required readings)
- Plea to the Dean: Do (not) remove this course from the calendar because . . .
- Note to a friend explaining what s/he missed in class today
- An explanation for a great business blunder, historical disaster, crime, common misconception, etc.

Strategy Two: Writing Tasks That Encourage Reflection

Reflection on an assignment

If I'd had more time to do this assignment, I would have. . . .

An e-mail to a friend with advice about how to tackle this [kind of] assignment

Reflection on a re-submitted assignment

Ask students to point out the improvements, what they did differently this time

Reflection on test results

Ask students to think beyond the grade to reflect on their overall performance, preparation, etc. What will they do differently next time they have a test to take?

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Another interesting list Launched in Fall 2006, the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education explores the institutional practices, conditions and programmes that foster the development and integration of seven learning outcomes necessary for “wise citizenship.” (See <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-overview/>).

The study has identified seven elements that, when considered together, are “distinctive indicators” of a liberal arts education. The website says, “Our research is designed to help colleges and universities improve student learning and enhance the educational impact of their programs.” The seven outcomes follow, and they bear a very strong resemblance to the Essential Outcomes and Literacies espoused in Mount Allison’s own Academic Renewal Plan (See http://www.mta.ca/administration/vp/Renewal/MTA_Academic%20Renewal%20Plan09-16.pdf)

Wabash Liberal Arts Outcomes

1. Effective Reasoning and Problem Solving
2. Inclination to Inquire and Lifelong Learning
3. Integration of Learning
4. Intercultural Effectiveness
5. Leadership
6. Moral Reasoning
7. Well-Being: psychological, social, and physical

YOU ARE WARMLY INVITED TO ATTEND
PCTC FALL TEACHING DAY
WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 31, 2011

The Slow Professor

Dr. Maggie Berg, Queen’s University
Dr. Barbara Seeber, Brock University

Avard Dixon G10: 9 - 11:30 am

Refreshment break midway through session

Too few hours in the day? Feeling rushed contributes to stress, and stress affects our teaching, research and collegiality. Drawing on Slow Food’s embrace of pleasure, Maggie and Barbara envision “Slowness” not as a way to work less or to retreat into academic nostalgia, but rather to act purposefully in defense of intellectual and humane values. Combining research findings with dynamic interactivity, Maggie and Barbara will explore ways in which we could adopt *Slow* principles in our academic practice.

PLEASE NOTE THAT THE 2011 TUCKER TALK, SCHEDULED FOR AUGUST 31ST, HAS BEEN POSTPONED.

A new date for the talk and the President’s reception at Cranewood will be announced as soon as possible.

Congratulations to Dr. Rosemary Polegato, Ron Joyce Centre for Business Studies!

Rosemary has received the 2011 Association of Atlantic Universities Distinguished Teaching Award, which recognizes her as one of the most exceptional professors in the region.

