Good beginnings: Keys to success for teachers and learners

For teachers, fall (rather than spring) is our time of new beginnings. Everything changes: new students, new classes, new schedules. Even if you’ve taught a course for several years, isn’t it always a bit more exciting to walk into a class for the first time? To pass out a new syllabus? To look at new faces in class?

Having a good beginning is important for you as a teacher and for your students as learners. On one level, a good start just makes the rest of the semester better. It’s easier to establish a positive classroom environment than it is to turn one around. It’s easier to follow a clear syllabus than it is to be sure everyone is following the revised one. It’s easier to facilitate a class discussion if we know most of our students’ names. It’s easier to explain our grading policies at the start of the semester than it is to meet with unhappy students at the end of the semester.

The proverb, “Well begun is half done” certainly applies to teaching. If we clearly communicate course objectives to students, they will understand why we’re covering specific topics. Students can see connections between points if we can relate them to a central concept. The groundwork that we lay down in the first few weeks often determines how a course will go.

For our students, a good beginning is a key part of their learning. The National Study of Student Learning, which recently published some of its findings in Change, reported that in their study, teacher organization and preparation were more important to students’ learning than teacher skill and clarity. Pascarella (2001) states, “Students who judged the overall instruction they received as high in teacher organization and preparation tended to demonstrate significantly larger net gains [on measures of general cognitive development] than their peers who perceived less well-organized and prepared instruction” (p. 25). It’s good to know that the time we spend organizing and preparing significantly impacts students’ learning. And it’s relatively easy to improve our skills in these areas.

In this issue of Teaching Matters, you’ll find several ideas about ways you can have a great beginning. You’ll find this in a new format that we hope will be easier for you to use. Thanks to Sharon Bass, Angie Seat and Troy Bassett for their assistance on this redesign. If you have any comments or suggestions, please contact Judy Eddy at CTE at 864-4100 or jeddy@ku.edu.

Dan Bernstein has been named the new director of the Center for Teaching Excellence. He began his work at KU on August 1. Dan brings to the Center a record of recognized excellence in teaching and an impressive record of scholarship, including nationally recognized work on the scholarship of teaching. For this issue, Teaching Matters interviewed Dan.

**TM:** I know you were a professor of psychology at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. How long were you there?  
**DB:** For 29 years. I started out teaching large introductory classes and had a long-term research program on human motivation. After I became a full professor, I went meta, in both research and teaching. I did editorial work for two journals. I did a lot of writing and thinking about teaching, too, not just doing it. That led to sharing reflections with colleagues about what constitutes excellence in teaching and how we represent the intellectual work of teaching.  
**TM:** Is that how you became interested in this work?  
**DB:** Yes. The kind of work I get to do at the Center was a natural outgrowth of those years of interacting with many fine colleagues. Another catalyst was participation in various programs, such as the Carnegie Academy, that brought me into contact with a national range of exceptional teachers.

**TM:** Describe your UN-L project.  
**DB:** The Peer Review Project focuses on promoting a community for conversation about student learning. We began with faculty exchanging written reflections on samples of student work. They then wrote about connections between the way they teach and the way students learned. Once this writing was refined, we invited external colleagues who teach similar courses to offer comments on the quality of understanding shown by students.  
**TM:** How did this become a national project?  
**DB:** After finding that our faculty both enjoyed and felt they learned a lot from participating in this reflective community, we realized that an independent, arms-length perspective is what we seek for our other intellectual work. When the Pew Charitable Trusts offered to support an expansion, we identified four other research universities (Indiana University, Kansas State University, Texas A&M, University of Michigan) to interact around the same materials.  
**TM:** How do you approach working with faculty?  
**DB:** Faculty are the best judges of whether or not students are learning. Rather than offering prescriptions, I engage them in thinking deeply about student learning and how they can enrich it.  
**TM:** What would you like to see happen at CTE?  
**DB:** Fred Rodriguez created a climate for rich conversation about teaching and learning. I hope CTE will continue to be a place where faculty members can read the work of other teachers in their field of study, talk about what they can learn from that work, and offer their own views of the quality of student learning. I look forward to many conversations with KU faculty to hear how they work with students to achieve a high level of understanding.

**CTE welcomes more new staff members, sees others off**

Three more new staff members joined CTE this fall. Two graduate students will assist Dan Bernstein in his work: Greg Decker, doctoral student in psychology, and Ann Volin, doctoral student in English. Troy Bassett, who worked as CTE’s Graduate Research and Technology Assistant, completed his doctorate last May and is now teaching English at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence.

Our new undergraduate student assistant is Kelly Reynolds, a political science major. Kelly R. replaces Kelly Kenady, who is accelerating her course work in the creative writing program.
This fall, CTE will offer seven Lunch & Conversation sessions and one workshop as venues for discussing students’ learning. For more information, contact us at 864-4199 or cte@ku.edu.

Lunch & Conversation
Join faculty, staff and GTAs on the days listed below. You’re welcome to bring your lunch; CTE will provide treats and beverages. No RSVP is needed. All sessions will be held from 12 to 1 p.m. in the Center at 135 Budig Hall.

Sept. 5: Dealing with difficult situations with students. Most often, interacting with students is one of the best aspects of our work. Sometimes, though, we encounter difficult situations with students. How can we help prevent these from arising? How do we address them when they do occur? Mary Ann Rasnak, Student Development Center, and Bob Shelton, University Ombudsman, will lead this discussion.

Sept. 10: Integrating guest speakers into our courses. Guest speakers provide fresh perspectives on a topic, bring the “real” world into our classroom, or question ideas we may have. How do we make best use of their expertise? Join Kathleen McCluskey-Fawcett, psychology, for this session.

Sept. 27: Establishing partnerships with GTAs. GTAs can support faculty in many ways: as discussion leaders, as graders, or as co-teachers. Knowing how much responsibility to give GTAs, and how much guidance, can be a challenge. Andrea Greenhoot, English; Mike Johnson, English; and Dan Spencer, business, will give some suggestions and facilitate this discussion.

Oct. 1: Developing critical thinking skills. Concept maps are an effective method for students to develop and demonstrate higher-level thinking. Tracy Russo, communication studies/Carnegie Scholar, will share how she has used this strategy in her classes.

Oct. 3: Writing letters of recommendation for students. Whether you teach juniors and seniors or graduate students, you’ve probably been asked to write a letter of recommendation (or two, or 20). What points should you include in the letters? Are there ways to streamline the letter-writing process? Join Mary Klayder and Barbara Schowen, honors program, for this session.

Oct. 8: Creating a student-centered program. Two units, classics and journalism, were recently recognized for their work with CTE’s Department Teaching Award (see page 4). What, exactly, have these two done and how did they do it? Linda Davis and James Gentry, journalism, and Pam Gordon, classics, will describe their programs and their impact on teaching and learning.

Oct. 11: Teaching large classes: Strategies and support. Teaching a large class brings its own set of challenges, from logistics (How should I return exams?) to the philosophical (Do students retain more in a large class than in a small one?). Join three teachers of large classes—Peter Casagrande, English; Diane Fourny, French and Italian; and Jim Woelfel, humanities and western civilization—for this discussion.

Workshop
The following session will be held at CTE in 135 Budig. It is open and free to faculty, staff and GTAs. Space is limited; register soon.

Learning with technology: Similarities in mathematics and writing—Oct. 9, 3 to 4:30 p.m. With Estela Gavosto, mathematics, and Linda O’Donnell, CRL. Learning English composition and mathematics are, on the surface, two different enterprises. Does technology make learning these two subjects similar in some fundamental ways? Can we teach students how to use existing technology to further their learning and creativity? We will identify similarities in the learning and the creative process using technology in mathematics and writing and draw a parallel. We’ll explore what we can do and learn from each other across our disciplines.

NEWS & NOTES
Last spring, CTE’s advisory board identified one Faculty Fellow and six Small Grant recipients for the 2002-03 year. Hats off to Lee Skinner, Spanish and Portuguese, Faculty Fellow. And for Small Grants: Lawrence Davidow, pharmacy practice; William Johnson, geography; Joan Letendre, social welfare; Catherine Loudon, EEB; Rita Napier, history; and John Staniunas, theatre and film.
Classics, Journalism receive first Department Teaching Awards

Last year, CTE established a new program to recognize academic departments on the Lawrence campus that are making exemplary contributions to teaching and learning at KU. To inaugurate the program, two awards were given—one to a small department and one to a large department. The program had broad participation—28 departments submitted nominating statements for the award; eight were semi-finalists.

As CTE’s advisory board evaluated nominees, they focused on three areas: First, how departments were creating and nurturing a culture for teaching and learning; second, units’ commitment to teaching and learning at the department/school level; and third, how departments supported student-centered activities and resources for undergraduate, graduate or professional students.

Semi-finalists submitted portfolios of their work. From these, the board chose two units as recipients, the Department of Classics and the School of Journalism, as announced at the KU Summit.

The Department Teaching Award program will continue this academic year. In Spring 2003, one large department will be notified of the award, which includes $12,000 in FY04 state funds. (The award alternates between large and small departments.)

The complete Call for Nominations can be found on the CTE web site, www.ku.edu/~cte, after September 10. For more information, contact Dan Bernstein at the Center, phone 864-4199 or e-mail djb@ku.edu.

Teacher Appreciation Banquet honors faculty

On May 9, 2002, 59 faculty from the Lawrence campus and Medical Center were recognized by undergraduate students for excellence in teaching at the fifth annual CTE Teacher Appreciation Banquet. More than 200 teachers, students and guests attended.

Last spring, the Center asked outstanding seniors from all departments to name a teacher who exemplified excellent teaching (some large departments asked to be divided by program). This year, CTE worked with undergraduate students for nominations; for 2002–03, graduate students will make selections. The following were honored last May:

Richard Hale, aerospace engineering; Dorthy Pennington, AAAS; Norman Yetman, American studies; Gwynne Jenkins, anthropology; Bruce Johnson, architecture; Jane Asbury, art; William Lewis, Kelly Welch and Parker Lessig, business; Susan Williams, chemical and petroleum engineering; Cynthia Larive, chemistry; Francis Thomas, CEA engineering; Tara Welch, classics; Roxanne Mettenburg, clinical lab sciences; Adrienne Dennis Kunkel, communication studies; Susan Dillon, cytotechnology; Pok-Chi Lau, design; Fumiko Yamamoto; EALC; Neal Becker, economics; Perry Alexander, Jerzy Grzymala-Busse and James Rowland, EECS; David Bergeron, English; Dorothy Daley, environmental studies; Allan Pasco, French and Italian; Johannes Feddema, geography; W. R. Van Schmus, geology; Carmen Taleghani-Nikazm, German; Karl Koob, health information management; Jonathan Earle and Eric Rath, history; David Cateforis, history of art; Jan Sheldon, HDFL; Peter Casagrande, HWC; Charles Marsh and Sharon Bass, journalism; Anita Herzfeld, LAS; Joan Sereno, linguistics; Margaret Bayer, mathematics; Lorin Maletsky, mechanical engineering; Gary Grunewald, medicinal chemistry; Mark Holmberg, music and dance; Katherine Fletcher, nursing; Susan Lunte, pharmaceutical chemistry; Roland Seifert, pharmacology and toxicology; Robert Emerson, pharmacy practice; Rex Martin, philosophy; Barbara Anthony-Twarog, physics and astronomy; Allan Cigler, political science; Annette Stanton, psychology; Timothy Miller, religious studies; Maia Kipp, Slavic languages and literatures; Stephen Kapp, social welfare; Robert Antonio, sociology; Judith Richards, Spanish and Portuguese; Steven Barlow, SPLH; Fred Rodriguez, teaching and leadership; Matthew Jacobson, theatre and film; Lorraine M. Bayard de Volo, women’s studies.
First-day questions

On the first day of class, give students a brief summary of the topics you’ll be covering in the course. Then ask them to look over the syllabus and think of one question they would like to have answered during the semester. Explain that you’ll return to these questions when you discuss the course topics.

Ask students to write their questions on index cards. Sort questions by topic and include them in your class notes on a particular topic. Try to incorporate the questions at appropriate times in the semester.

Use these questions as reminders of the issues that students think are important and interesting. The questions will also help you show the class that you welcome their ideas and want to encourage their curiosity about course material.


Learning names

Knowing your students’ names is a great way to establish a positive classroom environment. If you have difficulty remembering names, try these suggestions:

• For the first few weeks of class, have students sit in the same seat every day. Make a seating chart of where students sit and use it to call on them in class.
• Memorize the names of one row of students each class period. Before class starts, review the row you learned during the previous class period, then add another row.
• Ask students to give their name each time before they speak. Continue doing this until everyone knows everyone’s name.
• Have students make nameplates. Pass out 8.5 x 11” heavy paper. Have students fold the paper in half, length-wise, so nameplates measure 4.25 x 11”. Ask students to write their name in bold letters on the plate. Collect plates at the end of class and pass them out at the start.
• If your class is large, use a seating chart and divide the class into sections. Memorize the names of eight to ten students in each section. Take digital photos of students in each section to match faces and names.
• In a large class, have students form groups of five or six. Ask each group to meet with you outside of class. This will give you a chance to work with the students in smaller groups, so you’ll have a better chance of remembering their names.


Collaborative syllabus

On the first day of class, give students a list of topics you must cover, as well as some that you could cover in the course. Ask them to rank no more than 10 of the “coulds.” After class, compile and weight their preferences based on the number of students who want to discuss each topic. At the next class meeting, present the results to the class and give them a proposed set of topics based on their rankings and an appropriate sequence to handle the content. Ask for their feedback and make any changes necessary; collectively agree that the sequence and the content of the syllabus will be the course outline. Students are more interested in discussions and readings when they have input into the course.

Exemplary online instruction requires seven key elements

Susan Zvacek, IDS

As online instruction becomes more prevalent, so do articles in various publications explaining how to create a good online course. Words and phrases such as “exemplary design” or “quality” or “best practices” appear in titles and abstracts, along with bullet-lists of criteria for these models of excellence in online instruction. Such articles echo the call for rigor in technologically-enhanced education, which is a positive trend, but ultimately begs the question, “How is this different from what we should have been doing all along in our traditional face-to-face classes?”

With even a cursory examination of a few of these articles, the answer becomes clear. Technology is acting as a catalyst for us to step back and think about the components of our courses that make them truly excellent, whether those courses are in a bricks-and-mortar classroom or a Web-based learning space. If we end up rethinking our course goals, our instructional strategies or our assessment plans because we’re considering going virtual, the benefits of the review remain, whether we adopt a high-tech approach or not.

Following is a list of elements (synthesized from a variety of sources) that contribute to an exemplary online course, along with some simple ideas for putting them into practice.

Clearly-defined objectives that are communicated to students—Some faculty have discovered that describing their expectations in a brief sentence or two, and then posting those as announcements in Blackboard, can be a simple way to remind students what they’ll be accountable for the next class period.

Prompt feedback to students—Encourage students to submit their assignments in digital form, on disk or as attachments to e-mail, then provide feedback using the “comments” function in your word processing package to save time writing out the same suggestions over and over.

Interaction between students and faculty, as well as among students—Online discussions with open-ended questions that allow time for reflection have been shown to increase not only the amount of interaction among students, but also improve the quality of responses overall than in real-time, in-class discussions.

Content that is easily available in a variety of formats—As multimedia options increase, the integration of text, graphics, audio and video clips (whether online or stored on CD) becomes a manageable and inexpensive way to present information addressing multiple learning styles.

Sufficient structure to facilitate student self-regulation of learning—Presentation/lecture outlines posted online can help students organize their study time and provide an excellent way to emphasize important concepts to listen for in class.

Ongoing assessment activities—Utilizing frequent online discussions, self-tests and group work to determine if students are getting it can prevent unhappy surprises at midterm, and helps to reduce the pressure that might doom a student wavering on the brink of cheating or plagiarism.

Motivational elements—Building in links to external (real world) Web sites that are relevant to course content helps establish connections between the class and a big picture perspective.

While not comprehensive, this list illustrates the point that factors contributing to quality online instruction aren’t so different from expectations for our face-to-face classes. If you’re considering utilizing some of these strategies but are feeling a bit overwhelmed, give IDS a call (4-2600), and we’ll help you get started.

SUMMARY:
Seven Key Elements of Exemplary Online Instruction
1. Clearly-defined objectives that are communicated to students.
2. Prompt feedback to students.
3. Interaction between students and faculty, as well as among students.
4. Content that is easily available in a variety of formats.
5. Sufficient structure to facilitate student self-regulation of learning.
6. Ongoing assessment activities.
7. Motivational elements.
Moving to a learner-centered approach benefits students

Judy Eddy, CTE

When I began teaching at the university level, one thing I most enjoyed about it was designing a course. I worked within department parameters, but I was able to set course content, policies, methods and student evaluation. Soon, though, I realized that I was at one end of a continuum and that many of my students could learn more if I moved from a teacher-centered approach to a learner-centered one.

Characteristics of a teacher-centered approach are fairly straightforward: we make all the decisions about what students will learn, how they will learn it, and how they will be evaluated. As Weimer (2001) explains, we don’t trust students to make responsible learning decisions. It can be difficult to trust students, especially when we know that some are not well prepared or self-motivated. Continuing to use a teacher-centered approach just perpetuates the problem, though. Weimer describes the effect this ultimately has: “In those professional lives yet to come, students will do much learning and they will do so in environments where teachers don’t call all the shots” (p. 1).

In contrast, learner-centered teaching focuses on student learning, not faculty teaching. Rather than designing a course around what we think students should know, we concentrate on what students need to know. Medical educator Ronald J. Markert (2001) identified eight principles of learner-centered teaching. Three are summarized below.

**Good teachers are always thinking about ways to improve what and how students learn**—Good teachers always work on questions like: “How can I give students more control over their learning?” “How can I encourage collaboration among students?” “How can I provide effective feedback?” “How can I accommodate learners at various levels of sophistication?” (p. 809–810).

**Good teachers do not talk as much as their less effective colleagues do**—Teachers talk less because students talk more. Students ask questions, describe problems to solve, talk in small groups and solicit views of other students. Students and teachers are quiet sometimes to think.

**Good teachers create an atmosphere where students are motivated by the intrinsic rather than the extrinsic**—“Students are motivated for intrinsic reasons when (1) the course of instruction is well planned, transparent and fair; (2) the relationship between learning and real life is clear; and (3) they see that their teachers care about their disciplines and their students” (p. 810).

What are some ways you can move on the continuum, from a teacher-centered classroom to a learner-centered one? Weimer (2001) offers these suggestions:

**Course activity and assignment decisions**—Design sets of assignments and let students choose which set they will complete. Don’t be offended if students look for “easy” assignments; if you don’t have any assignments like that, they won’t be an option.

**Course policy decisions**—Get students’ input on a course policy, such as participation. Have students work in groups to list behaviors that should count for participation credit and those that won’t. Integrate the lists into the policy.

**Course content decisions**—Students are clearly not experienced and knowledgeable enough to determine course content on their own, but we can let them be involved in the process. For example, ask students what topics, problems or readings they would like you to cover in the exam review session, and then design the session based on that input.

**Course evaluation decisions**—Here again, we can let students be involved in the process in a few ways. Let them suggest criteria for grading participation or for assessing various assignments.

On my own journey, I didn’t move as far to a learner-centered classroom as I would have liked. But I did make some moves, and my students were better off for it.

**Resources:**

**THE BOTTOM LINE:**
Learner-centered teaching focuses on student learning, not faculty teaching.
Syllabus checklist

Before you hand out your syllabus next semester, use this checklist to see if you’re missing any key items:

___ Basic information: Current year and semester, course title and number, number of credits, meeting time and place. Identify class meetings that aren’t scheduled for the assigned room. Provide your name, office address (map if it’s hard to find), office phone number and voice mail, e-mail, office hours, website address. Indicate whether students need to make appointments or may just stop in. If you list a home number, be specific about any restrictions (e.g., no calls after 10:00 p.m.).

___ Course purpose: Introduce subject matter and show how it fits into the curriculum. Explain what the course is about and why students would want to learn the material. Also show students the conceptual framework—why you’ve arranged topics in a given order and the logic of concepts you’ve selected.

___ Prerequisites: List knowledge, skills or experience you expect students to have or courses they should have completed. Suggest ways they might refresh skills if they’re uncertain about their readiness.

___ General goals and objectives: List three to five major objectives: What will students know/be able to do after this course? What skills/competencies do you want your students to develop?

___ Textbooks and readings by authors and editions: Include information about why the readings were selected. Show the relationship between the readings and the course objectives. Let students know whether they are required to read before class meetings.

___ Assignments, term papers and exams: Specify the nature and format of assignments, length of essays and deadlines. Give the exam dates and indicate the nature of the tests (essay, short-answer, take-home). How do assignments relate to the course objectives? Keep the work load balanced throughout the term.

___ Student evaluation and grades: Describe grading procedures, including components of the final grade and weights for each component (homework, papers, tests, final exam). Let students know the weights to help them budget their time. Will you grade on a curve or use an absolute scale?

___ Course policies: Clearly state policies regarding class attendance, late work, missing homework, tests or exams, makeups, extensions, reporting illnesses, cheating and plagiarism. You might also list acceptable and unacceptable classroom behavior (e.g. “Please refrain from reading the UDK during class.”)

___ Students with special needs: Let students know that if they need an accommodation for any type of disability, they should meet with you to discuss what modifications are necessary.

___ Course calendar/schedule: Include the sequence of course topics, preparations or readings, and assignments due. For readings, give page numbers and chapter numbers, which helps students budget their time. Exam dates should be firmly fixed, while dates for topics and activities may be tentative. Provide an updated calendar (in writing) as needed. Also list the last day students can withdraw without penalty.