Reflections from the Classroom

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Overview

University teaching has traditionally been designed and delivered by a professor acting alone as a master of knowledge. Course goals and objectives, selection of materials, design of assignments, and conduct of class time have all come from a single source. Often graduate students assist, but their activities are in service of the course designed by a professor. When the central activity of a course is delivering informative lectures, it is both sensible and manageable for a professor to lead a course that way. Our systems of formal evaluation of teaching focus heavily upon how well that individual responsibility is carried out, and course evaluations are taken as a measure of that person's role.

As the demands on instruction have increased, however, it has become difficult for any individual to generate all aspects of a course. Writing a term paper is no longer typically a one-shot effort turned in toward the end of a semester. Reading assignments often come with out-of-class writing designed to refine critical skills and frame ideas for class discussions. Groups of students combine their efforts to construct collaborative projects, meeting with each other in shared online work spaces. On top of that, courses are expected to be intellectually accessible to a wide range of students with varied preparation, so that learning success is high and courses are not barriers to student progress and degree completion. It is simply not reasonable for a single instructor to learn and master all the teaching and technical skills needed to construct and operate in a modern, student-centered learning environment.

An emerging vision of high quality university instruction is based on collaboration among a range of people who bring varied skills to course design. The most obvious addition is a specialist in teaching technology, not so much for software bells and whistles but rather someone with experience identifying what portions of learning are best suited for the online experience. Another valuable colleague would teach students about library use, not just searching for material but also designing assignments that guide students in learning to read and evaluate professional writing. If writing about critical thinking is a goal, it would be helpful to work with someone who has experience constructing assignments that guide students' development of those skills. Courses with assignments that gradually develop complex skills help students progress toward completion of a meaningful degree.

These sorts of collaborations are at the core of a campus-wide course redesign project we have been carrying out at KU the last three years. The goal of this project, funded by the Spencer and Teagle Foundations, is to improve undergraduates' writing and critical thinking skills in large courses. It is part of a network of projects being carried out at 13 major research universities across the nation; the overarching goal is the same at each institution, but each project utilizes a different design. A cornerstone of the KU project is the development of instruction teams, in which faculty members partner with staff from the KU Libraries, Writing Center, and Center for Teaching Excellence. Instead of calling upon those colleagues after problems emerge, the team engages in proactive redesign to maximize the effectiveness of each course for the wide range of students who attend a large state university. Each team also includes one or more Graduate Student Fellows (GSFs), who receive training from the KU Libraries and Writing Center then use these skills in the target course. Including specifically prepared graduate students was inspired by the Mellon Library/Faculty Fellowship program at UC Berkeley. Our aim in adopting this component was to make the team-design model sustainable at a large research university, while simultaneously creating new opportunities for our graduate students.

In the first stages of the redesign process, the faculty member identifies the particular writing, critical thinking, and research skills that he or she would like students to achieve and the sorts of tasks that provide occasions for students to use these skills. Each faculty member then collaborates with the instruction team to develop a series of assignments that build the targeted skills. The GSF and faculty member scaffold students' skill acquisition by providing guidance, practice, and feedback at each step. To evaluate the success of the redesigns and inform future iterations of the courses, we look at the quality of student work on key assignments and standardized measures of writing and thinking skills.

This project, now in its final year, began with the redesign of two primary courses: a psychology course on Cognitive Development (taught by Prof. Greenhoot) and a political science course on International Relations (taught by Profs. Kate Weaver and Mariya Omelicheva). Each year, we added a new cohort of four faculty members from a range of disciplines, including American studies, astronomy, biology, communication studies, history, film, and journalism. These faculty members participated in a semester-long seminar, applying the team-design model to their own course redesigns, then implementing the redesigned course and evaluating it by examining changes in student performance on key assignments the following year. The results so far are quite encouraging: students in the redesigned courses make significant gains in critical thinking and writing skills over the semester, and these gains are greater than what is observed in comparable, non-redesigned courses.

The first two essays in this *Reflections* volume highlight the high-end work of two of our participating faculty members, Sheyda Jahanbani and Jeff Hall. At first glance, their projects appear to be quite different: Prof. Jahanbani redesigned an introductory humanities course and Prof. Hall worked on an upper-level social science research methods course. Yet they share some key structural characteristics. Both instructors began by deciding what they wanted students to be able to do by the time they completed the course. Working with instruction teams as well as colleagues in their faculty cohort, each developed a set of staged assignments to help students progress toward the desired goals.

Prof. Hall's description of his course redesign odyssey is a first-rate example of evidence-based course transformation. The principle is surprisingly straightforward: each semester, the instructor pays attention to what students are learning and achieving and uses this evidence to guide course and assignment design decisions in the next offering. A fundamental part of this iterative process for Prof. Hall was the development of grading rubrics that align closely with the skills he wants his students to achieve. The rubrics have enabled him to identify his students' strengths and weaknesses and to target areas of difficulty in his course improvements during the next semester. His students have returned the favor with upgrades in their skill achievement and learning. By participating in faculty seminars and collaborating with library and writing specialists, Prof. Hall encountered new ideas for creating a successful learning environment that he would not have known about working alone.

Prof. Jahanbani's redesign shifted information delivery to the earliest portion of the class to lay the groundwork for cognitive apprenticeship the rest of the semester. Her innovation of compressing "the stuff" (as she calls it) into the first few weeks of the course freed her to devote time and resources to higher order skill development and helped make the reasoning behind her intellectual goals more visible to students, enabling her to successfully engage them on the path to thinking like a historian.

The third article describes a collaboration between Mike Vitevitch in psychology and Terese Thonus in the KU Writing Center. This conversation describes the kind of interaction that took place around course planning, and Prof. Vitevitch is clear about the benefits he and his students derived from redesigned assignments. Working as a team, they were able to construct a way to promote quality writing that resulted in better performance by students and less stress for the instructor. In the last article, CTE Graduate Assistant Ann Martinez reports on the experiences of three faculty members who participated in peer consultation about teaching. Profs. Angela Lumpkin, Leigh Stearns, and Lorie Vanchena have met over a period of a year to review and comment on many aspects of each other's courses. They report great value in learning from colleagues' experience and ideas, and further they describe how enjoyable the interactions were. The entire experience was both pleasant and professional, and it produced both tangible improvements in teaching and learning along with a peer's evaluation of the quality of teaching.

We hope that these four examples represent different models of faculty collaboration on teaching that our colleagues can imagine following. We believe the teaching portion of our work can be more engaging for us and more successful for our students if we work together.

Dan Bernstein and Andrea Greenhoot

Putting Carts and Horses in Order, Statistically

Jeffrey A. Hall
Communication Studies

Abstract
This essay describes how the course redesign process, initiated by my participation in two CTE programs, has allowed me to develop a more effective set of evaluative standards for COMS 356.

Keywords:
Backward design, Scaffolding, Library & Writing Center, Peer evaluation, Standards

Author's Note:
Just for fun, this is written in the genre of a social science research article, because I have begun viewing my teaching as a research project. The parenthetical comments identify traditional components of social science research papers.

Literature review

COMS 356: Introduction to Behavioral Research Methods is designed to teach Communication Studies students basic empirical and social scientific methods, to develop students' ability to read original research articles, to interpret statistical data, and to use statistical software. The course is both an introduction to survey and experimental methods and an introduction to statistics.

I adopted the model I was using to teach this course from my graduate university. In this model students, working in pairs, created their own research project, collected their own data from classmates, analyzed those data, and wrote up the findings in APA style. After two semesters of teaching COMS 356 at KU (Summer 2008, Fall 2008), I realized that I could not wholesale adopt the model of teaching from my prior university (*generalizability*). I was assuming that students possessed a variety of skills that were necessary to complete my assignments and projects. As a consequence, the first semester of teaching this class at KU to 90 students was very challenging. My trusty GTAs and I spent many, many hours outside of class trying to help students develop testable hypotheses, design basic instruments, and analyze their own data. Then it occurred to me that I needed to teach my students several foundational skills: the ability to find an original research article, the ability to distinguish an academic from non-academic source, the ability to develop a testable research question, and the ability to use prior research to support an argument.

The following semester I sought assistance in redesigning this course from CTE's Best Practices Institute. This has set me on a course-redesign odyssey. Since arriving at KU four years ago, I have taught COMS 356 six times, so I have had ample opportunity to craft this course. And I'm still not done (*program of research).*

Method & Results: Study One

The BPI helped me take my first real leap forward by introducing me to backward design. The principle is this: identify the skills students should have by the end of class and create assignments to help them develop those skills. Backward design fits hand-in-glove with scaffolding, which is the process of breaking down assignments into achievable and valuable objectives, which can be later assembled in a final project or paper. Moving forward with confidence into Fall 2009, my GTAs and I redesigned the class project: we limited project topics to four choices, we identified two of the three required variables for the students, and we created six assignments with explicit instructions crafted toward building a final paper (*independent variables*). Looking back on my written reflections on end-of-semester student evaluations from Fall 2009 (a CTE recommendation), there was no question in my mind that students were given more tools to succeed and felt more able to achieve their goals (*dependent variables*). However, the accompanying reality was that some students were either lost in the middle of the process or merely following instructors' suggestions instead of thinking critically about research. The problems seemed to reside in the fact that some assignments required students to learn multiple new skills at once, and that students did not know how to make use of available resources (*limitations of study 1*).

Method & Results: Study Two

Prior to the following semester (Fall 2010), I was recruited to participate in grant-funded, course-redesign research sponsored by the Spencer and Teagle Foundations. To mitigate the problems that seemed to recur every semester, my trusty GTA and I first analyzed the gap between what we hoped students would achieve at the end of the semester and the performance of students from the previous semester. As a result, we changed four of the six assignments and added two more assignments. One of these assignments explicitly incorporated a trip to the library (*field work*). Discussion sections met at the library, and with the help of our librarian, Julie Petr, students looked up original research articles. Instead of blindly attending the library session, we introduced a new assignment where students identified specific research variables within their project topic and possible search terms and synonyms to help them find academic articles. As a consequence of this change, in comparison to students in previous semesters of COMS 356, the students of Fall 2010 were more likely to use relevant peer reviewed articles in their projects (*dependent variable*).

Method & Results: Study Three

This semester (Spring 2011) I am teaching COMS 356 again. As required by the Spencer and Teagle Foundation grants, I sought assignment counseling from the Writing Center and created a pre- and post-test measure of student knowledge and attitudes. The Writing Center is an incredible resource for ensuring that assignments and grading rubrics are clearly worded and demonstrate near perfect parallelism. In part due to these changes, we now provide students with the grading rubric (another CTE suggestion) along with the assignment guidelines so that they might create a better product. Additionally, although the post-test has yet to be completed, the pre-test revealed that even though students had relatively low knowledge of research methods and statistics concepts, they gave themselves fairly high marks for their self-reported ability to understand research and statistics (*the perils of self-report data*). This means that part of the challenge of teaching COMS 356 will be recognizing that students have a lot of confidence in their ability to do research and understand statistics prior to beginning the class. This may mean that students feel that I am teaching them things they already know.

> Course design is really never finished, if you believe that education is a process of getting a larger percent of your students to learn a larger percent of the course material every semester you teach.

General discussion

Although I have made light of the notion that course redesign is a program of research, it is also true. It is really never finished, if you believe that education is a process of getting a larger percent of your students to learn a larger percent of the course material every semester you teach. And that is one of my main take-home points for you: as a consequence of this process I have had to seriously reconsider my role as an educator. I now believe that my job is to move the middle of the class (*Mean* + - 1 *SD*) toward a higher level of critical thinking and knowledge acquisition. I only realized in retrospect that all of the changes and improvements (not all changes were improvements) were for the sake of achieving better performance for the majority of students. Great students (A) can now finish COMS 356 assignments faster and more accurately due to good assignment writing and careful scaffolding. The students in the middle appear to be demonstrating a more precise and accurate understanding of the material. The students on the other end of the curve (D & F) don't fall behind as dramatically as they did the first semester I taught the course. This is all real improvement in my newly recalibrated eyes.

At the conclusion of all of this work, I have had one additional important moment of self reflection. I have concluded that my standards stand in my way. My standards are those based on a personal *bildungsroman* of constant engagement and achievement. If, like me, you attended a graduate program where your graduate peers were seriously hardworking and research focused, and prior to that were an undergraduate who cared passionately about nearly every subject matter, then it is difficult to see the course from the perspective of a student who is not like you. Some students simply want to finish the course, others have family or work obligations pressing on their time, and others simply do not wish to put forth the required work to grasp the material. I expected my students to be as driven as I was, and I may have been unfairly evaluating students who didn't share my high standards. So, I had to ask myself, "Who are my standards for?" If my standards are for my students' collective sake, then I realized that I needed to start with what my students knew and build from there, using every tool in the CTE toolbox to help me. This is the odyssey of redesign: shape the course so that every student—from the highly motivated to the one who had little time and energy to devote—leaves with an increased knowledge of the material and more chances to practice critical thinking.

Future directions

In a conversation with Dan Bernstein about this process, he suggested that there is one missing step in all of this: peer evaluation. Before I went about redesigning and scaffolding, I should have spent time with my faculty peers in and outside of the COMS department and seriously considered what was necessary to teach and what was bonus material. Because this is a required COMS class, this is a particularly relevant additional step. I should have asked questions such as, how deep of an understanding of statistics and research methods do students in COMS 356 really need to attain? Should they be able to begin an honor's thesis, or simply know how to read a research article? Should they be prepared to collect and analyze their own data for a project in an upper-level class, or is that unrealistic? If we don't engage with one another as faculty and discuss what we really want our students to learn in a class, then most of the redesign process is based upon an individual instructor's internalized standards. This can be a great metric, or it can miss the mark. In either case, when it comes to course redesign, it should be the horse leading the cart, statistically.

Prof. Hall's work is profiled in a portfolio on CTE's website (www.cte.ku.edu/gallery).

Getting the "Stuff" Done in an Introductory Course

Sheyda Jahanbani
History

Two thick yellow envelopes awaited me. Student evaluations from my first semester at KU, my first semester out of grad school, and my first attempt at teaching that most dreaded of history classes (for students as well as faculty), the survey. I had been warned by my colleagues to expect the worst from the evaluations, to try—if at all possible—to resist the temptation to pour over each half-legible line, taking every criticism personally. I had been assured that teaching the survey was a thankless task. I had also been advised to open the envelope on a Friday night, with friends and food around, and a bottle (or two!) of wine at the ready.

I didn't heed any of this eminently sensible advice. Instead, I opened the envelope early on a Monday morning, alone in my windowless office, right before a day full of student meetings, with nothing but a lukewarm cup of coffee with which to wash down the bitter pill. And, what a bitter pill it was. Having received effusive praise as a graduate teaching assistant and instructor, I came to KU thinking I knew something about how to teach, thinking, in fact, that teaching was one of my natural strengths. It quickly became clear that this had either been a self-indulgent delusion or that somewhere out on I-70 between Rhode Island and Kansas, my teaching skills had fallen out of my overstuffed car. Indeed, according to my students, my survey was "boring," it was "too hard," and, worst of all to my fresh-out-of-grad-school self, it was "obvious" that I was "new" to KU. Several students conceded that I "really knew" my "stuff" but that I was trying way too hard to make sure they knew it, too. One student offered a more pointed critique. "I get that you were trying to teach us 'how historians think,'" this student wrote, "but in a class of 300 people, you've just got to get the stuff done." Get the stuff done? I was perplexed. What, in a history survey, was "the stuff"? What did it mean to "get it done"?

The more I thought about it, the clearer it became and, also, the more insurmountable a pedagogical challenge. Indeed, this suggestion to get the stuff done seemed to reveal not what was wrong with my class so much as what was wrong with popular perceptions of history as an intellectual undertaking. For, as those of us who do it for a living frequently lament, "doing history" is often defined in the public imagination as an act of documentation rather than interpretation. How many of us who choose to pursue a career in this field have had the awkward conversation in which a relative or family friend sheepishly confesses how much he or she hated history in school precisely because it seemed, in one memorable phrase, just like "one damn thing after another"? Hearing that, I always think that learning history seems something akin to eating one's vegetables. It has to be stuffed down your gullet no matter how horrible it tastes, because your elders say it's good for you. It had been my frustration with this very notion of what historical scholarship looks like that informed the way I designed my survey in the first place.

Indeed, in an earnest effort to introduce students to the interpretive potential of my discipline, I had presented them with a series of intellectual problems that historians face when they think about the United States in the twentieth century rather than with a grand narrative of historical events. In exams, I asked students to analyze primary sources and make their own interpretive claims instead of regurgitate information. In class discussions, my teaching assistants were directed by me to provoke debates not about what happened but about how we *think* about what happened. And, yet, here I encountered a student who, though sensitive to the ways in which I was trying to convey "how historians think," still felt that there was "stuff" I needed to get done.

In a rather unexpected way, this student's comment served as the most significant piece of pedagogical inspiration I've ever had. With generous help from the Center for Teaching Excellence and countless brainstorming sessions with brilliant graduate students and faculty across campus, I began the task of completely re-conceptualizing the course—not to "get the stuff done" but to challenge the assumptions upon which that admonition itself rested. I based my revision of the course on two principles I'd learned about through my conversations at CTE. First, I had to design the course backwards. What were the learning outcomes I wanted to achieve? That question, phrased in what many dismiss as ed-speak, doesn't have to yield a list of overly sophisticated answers. In my case, my goals were quite simple. I wanted my students to leave History 129 understanding that facts and history are not synonymous with one another. I wanted them to be able to recognize an intellectual problem. And, at my most ambitious, I wanted them to have a sense of how one might marshal a specific arsenal of critical thinking skills to solve those kinds of problems.

Having established that much, I proceeded to build the course around the theory of cognitive apprenticeship. How had *I* come to understand the difference between interpretation and documentation in historical scholarship? How did that difference manifest itself in the daily activities that characterized my intellectual life as a historian? And, were those differences mirrored in the kinds of assignments I gave to my students? The answers to those questions illuminated one of the central failings of my History 129 1.0. Professional historians read, write, and talk. We never take exams. We are never asked to regurgitate information. So, the first things to go were the three exams in my course. Also, as professionals, we rarely listen to narrative lectures. The kind of talks we go to usually revolve around a problem in historical scholarship. And, we don't read narrative histories very often, either. Thus, my lectures had to not just tell students about the existence of historical questions and interpretive "answers" but had to, instead, *model* the ways in which I recognize and frame both questions and interpretations. The textbook, which I had assigned the year before, had to go, too, because it only reinforced the notion of a grand narrative. In the place of all of

I proceeded to build the course around the theory of cognitive apprenticeship. How had *I* come to understand the difference between interpretation and documentation in historical scholarship? How did the difference manifest itself in the daily activities that characterized my intellectual life as a historian? And, were those differences mirrored in the kinds of assignments I gave to my students?

this, I had to create assignments that helped break down this process of thinking historically for students, from the primary source exercises they did in our weekly labs to the multi-stage final paper they wrote.

As I thought about how to transplant these intellectual activities into an introductory history survey, though, I worried about the extent to which students who came into the class with very little historical knowledge might respond. Within the limitations of one semester, how could I possibly give them enough content to enable them to learn skills of interpretation? And, how could I provide them with that content without giving them the sense that there was "real" history (the "stuff") and then there was this loosey goosey thing called "historical thinking"? Thanks to our wizardly colleagues at EGARC, I came up with a couple of strategies. For the first three weeks of the course, the students, under the watchful eye of their GTAs, engaged in the massive act of producing a History 129 wiki, which documented the factual narrative of 20th century U.S. history. They did this in teams, relying exclusively on textbooks that I had chosen and put on reserve. They were given very explicit instructions about what kinds of facts to find and how to find them. They also had to cite each piece of factual information they identified using professional standards of attribution, which we introduced to them in our labs. The production of the wiki served my goals in two ways. First, I got to show students, three weeks in, that although we had a useable account of "the stuff that happened" from 1877 to 1990 in the United States, we didn't really understand *why* any of it had happened or what the consequences of any of it had been. This served as a powerful way to distinguish between facts and history. Second, the wiki provided students with a living reference that mirrored Wikipedia, a resource with which they are all too familiar. When they had questions during a lecture or discussion, we could call up the wiki and figure out what we needed to know. We had gotten "the stuff" done in the first three weeks of class, and now could move on to figuring out what to do with it! This is exactly what I had hoped my survey could do.

On a steaming day last summer, I walked into my office to find another stack of thickly stuffed yellow envelopes. I felt almost no compulsion to open them. Not because I didn't care or because I dreaded the results, but rather because I knew from the vibe in the classroom, my review of student work, and the responses I'd received from individual students that the class, with all of its complicated assignments and difficult readings, had worked. With an eye towards achieving one or two specific goals, a commitment to making my own scholarly modes of thought visible, and a decision to make my pedagogy transparent, I had turned the thankless task of teaching the survey into an experience that served to reinforce my enthusiasm for my discipline and, it seems, to leave students with a sense that the "stuff" historians do may not be so awful tasting after all.

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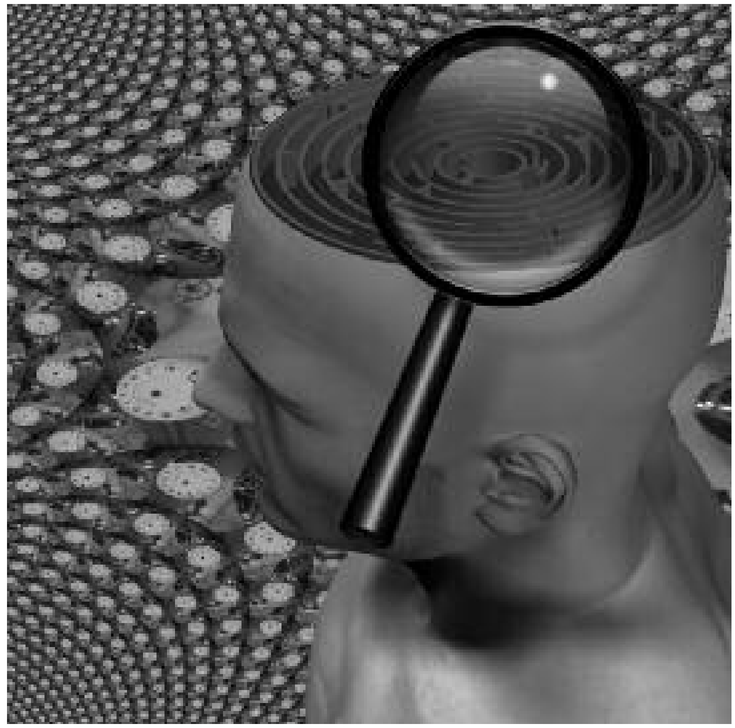
Prof. Jahanbani's work is profiled in a portfolio on CTE's website (www.cte.ku.edu/gallery).

Writing as a Vehicle for Learning



Recently, Terese Thonus, KU Writing Center, and Michael Vitevitch, Psychology, talked with a CTE staff member about their collaborations in implementing writing in courses.

Mike: The most recent instance of us working together was with a group of students in HNRS 492, which is sort of a catch all course number, but this particular one is a course titled "Research Development." In the past it was a summer program that recruited kids from the University Honors Program to develop a research proposal with a faculty mentor. One of the main reasons for moving it into the academic year was the availability of people in the KU Libraries and the Writing Center. They had not been components of the summer program. But now students can take advantage of the resources that are available to them to produce a product that is the best that they can create. Sometimes honors students tend to think, "Well, I already know how to write; I don't need this." But here they're learning a different genre in writing for their particular discipline. That is why I wanted to get students into the Writing Center.

Terese: One of the questions that has come up for us is the "soft peddling" of writing and research support. The conventional wisdom has been that if you force someone to use these resources, they may resent it or not make effective use of them. And yet you see in different reports how important information, literature, and student support are in student success during the four years of the undergraduate experience. And so you think, what can we do to make it an institutionalized part of the undergraduate experience, rather than, as is our case, a resource of last resort?

Mike: I think the Writing Center sometimes gets the same rap as CTE: "You're getting sent off to the woodshed." That's the line that Dan Bernstein uses for this misconception. It's remedial—you're not a good writer because you're going to the Writing Center. You're not a good teacher because you're going to CTE. Well no, it's the people who actually care about teaching and learning and other educational issues who go to CTE, not the ones who don't care. Those who are concerned about how they get their ideas across are the good writers, and the ones I presume go to the Writing Center.

Terese: In the past, the involvement of the Writing Center with other faculty members has been on the level of planning, rather than at the level of 'we're going to be in the classroom, with the students, or the students are going to be in the Writing Center'—although that also has happened. But one of the most enjoyable features for me is creating assignments with faculty members and responding to these with the graduate student assistants. Some GTAs are really shocked when I say that maybe out of the 50 students in class, you respond fully to 10 each time. The rest of the time you use a rubric, and you give them some comments and you let them make some revisions. You don't have to be buried by an avalanche of grading just because you're using writing to learn in your class. When those little light bulbs go off, it gets really fun. When they realize that it doesn't have to be hell on earth. It can be doable.

Mike: I think that working with the Writing Center has been a time saver. In the past I tried to stumble through some criteria to look at when evaluating a paper, but why reinvent the wheel? The experts are already there. There are very effective rubrics that you can borrow and tweak for your specific class or assignment. These rubrics would save faculty members a lot of time grading papers if they had the Writing Center and their students interact in a certain way. Students could get closer to the target faster. I made fewer and fewer comments as the semester went by, because students were improving in their writing.

Terese: And in using their peers [through in-class review] as they become better and better trained, then you, as a faculty member, would need to say less.

Mike: Yes, I would definitely say it's a *big* time saver.

Terese: Also, expertise develops from both sides. In Mike's class, he asked questions that I never would have thought of asking. For other classes that I've visited, I've found that I've had to do a lot of background research in preparation to work on the subject for that class, but also the feedback that I got from the faculty member and the students was fabulous. One time, we had a huge discussion of how much a physicist should use the passive voice, as opposed to a chemist, or a linguist, or a humanist. Running through those arguments, I don't feel that I am always the expert going in, but through the discussions we all come out with different perspectives.

Mike: That makes that kind of discussion [on writing and research] less uncomfortable for students, because they have to get more abstract to talk to each other; they can't use those jargon terms. Jargon is just shortcut terms for people who also know code words, but you're not always going to be talking with another expert. You're going to need to be able to communicate those findings, those ideas, what you're doing, and why what you're doing is important, to everybody. It is kind of like looking through a dictionary where you find the definition, but there's a term in the definition that you also have to look up, and so on. There's a study that correlates the number of times an article has been cited with the readability of the article. Things that are written at a lower grade level, that are highly intelligible by everybody, are cited more often than articles that have jargon in the professional domain. Not everyone who is in the field is an expert in the field. You may be an undergraduate or a graduate student reading an article for the first time, so the easier it is to read, the more treasured it becomes. Even within a professional field, being a good writer is not all the flowery terms, but being able to communicate your ideas.

Mike: I think that working with the Writing Center has been a time saver. In the past I tried to stumble through some criteria to look at when evaluating a paper, but why reinvent the wheel?

Terese: Clarity is so important. I've talked to some faculty members who understand the power of writing and learning—that it's not the proof of learning but rather the vehicle to learn. Often when I work with faculty members, I talk about linking their comments in a paper with the type of feedback a student would get at the Writing Center. I suggest that they say to their students, "You've seen my comments;

now how about going to the Writing Center and getting a peer comment." Because what you might find is that the student will get the same feedback, and that will underscore some major revisions that the student needs to make. This prevents students from saying, "That's just not what my professor wants; they have a different idea of writing than anyone else I've taken classes from before." As a student, when you bring an assignment into the light of the Writing Center, you realize there isn't a lot of darkness back there in the faculty member's office. They're in the same arena. They're not mean and ugly and trying to hurt you. Sometimes it takes some of the emotional fear out of the relationship.

Mike: Most students think, "I already know how to write a paper." I use short writing assignments for my Introduction to Psychology class, and students are shocked that I make suggestions about how to write it. That's why I call it a *genre* of writing, because in each discipline writing is very different.

Terese: Yes, and I think all professors are ultimately writing instructors. Also, one of the things I've heard recently from some faculty is that coming to the Writing Center as they are planning their course has been a time saver, because it is a way to rehearse the class and avoid pitfalls later in the semester. The revision of the course is happening as it's being delivered, without the shame and blame.

Mike: Prevision rather than revision.

Terese: Exactly, and it's a huge time saver. When faculty members leave my office, I feel that I've contributed something and see that they are more confident using the writing assignments for their class. It's not that I know how to do it but that I know to ask the dumb questions.

Mike: Embedding writing as a skill in multiple classes is needed. You can't take a class and be done with writing. You have to keep working at it. It's a process.

I Get Better with a Little Help from

Ann Martinez
CTE/English

Last fall, CTE initiated its Peer Teaching Commentary Program, in which faculty members from across the University become part of a teaching triad. These triads allow faculty members to obtain new perspectives into teaching and potentially broaden their instructional strategies.

One teaching triad meeting this year is composed of Angela Lumpkin, professor of health, sport, and exercise sciences; Lorie Vanchena, associate professor of Germanic languages and literatures; and Leigh Stearns, assistant professor of geology.

In joining the teaching triad last semester, Lorie Vanchena was looking for a structured way to think and talk about her teaching. After teaching an undergraduate general education course last semester, Vanchena decided that she wanted to respond differently to some of the teaching challenges she had faced. "I like the idea very much of working with colleagues who are in different departments, different disciplines, where even the class sizes are different," she said. (Vanchena has 18 students in her class this semester, while Stearns has 60, divided between the Lawrence and Edwards campus, and Lumpkin has 80.) Vanchena added, "With the triad we have a good way of using our colleagues' experience and expertise to apply to our own teaching. My expectations have been exceeded. It's really been the perfect thing to do."

For Leigh Stearns, the motivation for joining the teaching triad was the promise of garnering guidance from more seasoned teachers. Stearns said, "I think it's helped a lot in terms of my confidence in the class, either just having that validation or the new ideas that Angela and Lorie have suggested. It was helpful because we got together before the semester started and went over the syllabus and talked about what we had struggled with the previous year. Now I feel I'm much more engaged. It has made me think less about content, which I know, and more about how to get the message across."

Angela Lumpkin participated in CTE's Faculty Seminar last year. She wanted to delve further into teaching, and the triad offered her the chance to meet others with similar goals. "I love teaching. I love talking about teaching," Lumpkin said. "The most important thing for me has been finding colleagues who are interested in teaching, who want to talk about teaching, who want to experiment with different techniques, who want to listen to different perspectives from different disciplines. Most of us don't have these rich conversations about teaching every day, and when you've tried something new and

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had it validated by a colleague, it is very beneficial."

However, in this case, the benefit for the triad members is not only due to diverse disciplines, but also to the varying degree of teaching experience they have as a collective. As Vanchena explains, "Leigh and I both look to Angela as an expert teacher; she's a masterful teacher. One of the things she's said is that you have to start where the students are. That is a phrase that had never gone through my mind before, but it is incredibly enlightening. For example, if I am in the Spencer Museum of Art's print room looking at 18th century prints with students who have never seen these before, and one print in particular is a beautiful, detailed landscape with a very small human figure in the foreground, a student may say 'Look, it's a Hobbit!' That is not what I had anticipated their reaction to be, but I think of Angela and the fact that this is where the students are, and so we go from there."

For Stearns, little changes her triad has suggested have made the biggest impact with her students. "For a three hour class at night, I've got to keep students engaged all the time. In previous years I think that's where I stumbled; I was lecturing and I knew they were bored, but I didn't know what to do about it. Now, I do something different every 15 to 20 minutes, which has helped a lot. Angela suggested, and I knew this from going to CTE sessions, that I have to know students' names, and this year I've really worked hard at it and they pay a lot more attention when they know that I know who they are. A little thing like that has gone a long way."

Teaching triad members meet on their own schedule to talk about various aspects of their classes and their teaching. Stearns explains, "CTE did a good job pairing us based on what we wanted to accomplish for the term, and I think we all originally said we wanted to incorporate more writing into our courses, so that's what we started with. We looked at each other's rubrics on how to grade papers, and that helped a lot in being more focused with the assignments. I graded many papers last week, and having a rubric really helped. But our triad also evolved into more of a teaching support group. Being able to just talk has been great. It's been very nice to be able to bounce ideas off each other."

But meetings are not restricted to just talking about syllabi and teaching strategies, since triad members visit each other's classes throughout the semester. Lumpkin is quick to emphasize that a key element to these visits is the diversity of the triad members. Because each comes from a different discipline, she explains, "We very quickly got over the fact that the content was irrelevant. None of us knew anything about the content that was being taught in the class [we visited]. The most clueless student in the room knew more than we did walking in. Because of this, we weren't critiquing the content expertise but instead the ability of the teacher to take that content down to the level of someone who doesn't have that expertise." And it is precisely this outsider's perspective that Lumpkin finds to be key in expanding teaching strategies. "I would like to encourage university-wide efforts to facilitate cross-disciplinary groups. They are probably more valuable than in-department ones, which tend to focus on the culture within that department. It would be very beneficial to have evaluations in the dossier from outside the department. I think that gives a new, clear set of eyes and allows reviewers to focus on the teaching, not the content."

Lumpkin adds, "The triad has allowed us to broaden our perspectives in seeing how we do things differently. We've been really candid and open. We feel very comfortable with each other."

And, when broadening perspectives so widely, why set limits? As Vanchena adds, "In some ways we're just scratching the surface of what we could talk about. If we've already talked about syllabi and writing assignments, then we can move on to other issues—there is no end of topics we could address. We can hit the ground running. In fact, I'd like another semester with this triad."

A sentiment echoed by all three members. "I would welcome the opportunity to participate in an ongoing peer teaching triad annually. And not just because Lorie and Leigh are delightful people, but because I love talking about teaching," Lumpkin said.

Stearns added, "I probably would benefit from switching my peer triad for diversity's sake, but they've been so great I don't think any of us want to leave our little group. We want that to last another year, just to have that continuity. It's been really nice to meet people outside of the department, across the campus."

And they are already looking ahead. "Lorie, Angela, and I," Stearns said, "were talking about what we want to do next time around. It has brought up new ideas that I'd like to try next year for classes, in terms of how to start—how to do different papers and class projects. And Angela says she tries something new every single term. That's great! I wish we all did that and didn't just recycle the same material."

When asked about the biggest benefit of the teaching triad, Lumpkin responded, "The conversation with colleagues. That to me is the most helpful. An affirmation of what is being done. A different perspective. A challenge. It's nice to have someone ask, 'Well, why did you do that?' Or 'Why don't you consider this?' It's been interesting to bounce ideas off of each other. It's been really positive. I like to think that I'm continually like a sponge, soaking things in. When others validate it gives me more courage to keep doing it and keep pressing. Sometimes you just need someone to encourage you."

Which is exactly what's happened for these faculty members.