

# THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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## *Conference on Reflective Teaching in Higher Education Report on the Workshop Sessions, October 25, 1997*

*As part of the Dedication festivities, the Center held a half-day conference addressing the topic of "Reflective Teaching in Higher Education" open to the entire Brown teaching community. The response was overwhelmingly positive and one hundred faculty and graduate students, as well as alumni and staff, participated in this inaugural event and stayed for the luncheon and panel discussion afterward. Below is a review of the highlights of these provocative workshop sessions. The Sheridan Center is deeply grateful to all those who were kind enough to lead a workshop, and the feedback indicated that participants were enthusiastic as well. The following reports were prepared by Patricia Arant, Jane Lancaster, Rebecca More, Margo Ballou, Rick Bungiro, Carolyn Schick, Michael Woolcock, Vicki McKenna, and Friederike Baer-Wallis.*

### **1. Teaching, Technology and Accountability**

*Prof. Randall Bass, (English) Georgetown University, and former Sheridan Center Graduate Teaching Fellow*

Prof. Bass presented work he is doing currently - how to integrate the use of computer technology, specifically the hypertext, in the classroom. In his course on American literature, the students use websites which he has prepared to access additional literature related to the topics they are reading in class. They create a website and papers in the hypertext format - a process that builds upon itself over the semester. The advantages are that the students become more involved in research, in each others papers (which they can quote) and begin to think of historical documents and literature in a more creative, analytical way. Bass used actual student projects and projects on existing websites at other universities as examples of this process. An advantage of using the computer technology is

that more passive activities of reading and writing papers become very "active" as well as interactive.

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## **2. Constructing a Syllabus**

*Michael J. V. Woolcock, Ph. D., (Sociology) Sheridan Center Graduate Teaching Fellow*

Mr. Woolcock started with the pedagogy of constructing a syllabus. In order to construct an effective syllabus, one needs to work closely with the aims and objectives of the course. There is also great importance placed on preparation of the syllabus. The participants were divided into small groups to discuss the differences between the aims and objectives of a course. The groups then shared their ideas with the rest of the participants. One group worked through the aims and objectives of a particular course. Another group discussed the advantages and disadvantages of handing out week-by-week assignments together with the aims and objectives. They mentioned the importance of planning ahead in the week-by-week assignments. A third group worked on analyzing a particular syllabus. They mentioned the use of the Internet as a scholarly tool to aid in syllabus construction. Woolcock also discussed the structural organization of his own Sociology syllabus. The importance of thinking through the aims and objectives before plotting out the rest of the syllabus was stressed (i.e. importance of preparation). Students need to know how and why the professor has made the choices for the syllabus and how he or she believes the rest of the syllabus will permit the accomplishment of the aims and objectives of the course.

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## **3. The Teaching Portfolio**

*Prof. Pennylyn Dykstra-Pruim (German Studies) and Hannelore Rodriguez-Farrar (History of Art and Architecture), former Sheridan Center Graduate Fellow*

This dynamic session discussed the ways in which Teaching Portfolios assist faculty in developing effective assessment criteria for departmental faculty evaluations. Three main points were made: 1) While the teaching portfolio includes evidence of one's commitment to effective teaching, the most critical part of the document is the interpretation of this evidence. 2) The portfolio should not be assembled in isolation - feedback from others during its development is crucial. 3) The portfolio is never finished, but rather should be under constant revision.

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#### **4. Creative Teaching Collaboratives and Teaching Communities**

*Dean of the College, Kenneth Sacks*

Kenneth Sacks, Dean of the College, led a session which considered how to build campus teaching collaboratives and communities. The two main issues discussed were team teaching with two or more faculty teaching together and collaborative teaching. Various problems with team teaching emerged, such as the necessity for both faculty to have the same commitment of time and vision to all facets of the course from content to grading and advising, power dynamics among faculty, and flexibility with regard to content and course management.

Collaborative teaching (e.g. incorporating students in the process of teaching the course) was observed by one senior faculty member to represent a shift from being a factual teacher to a conceptual one. His goal was to endow students with intellectual methods they could use beyond the classroom. Other issues discussed included methods for getting more and effective student feedback (one-minute papers, Tom Webb's grading strategy, individual meetings, class presentations). Clear course goals were seen as a key means to making it explicit to students what they should expect from a course and how they should develop their own ability to be advocates for their own educational experience. The consensus was that collaborative teaching encouraged faculty to be coaches in the learning process.

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#### **5. Language Instruction and Learning**

*Prof. Beth Bauer and Prof. Victoria Smith (Hispanic Studies), Prof. Sylvie Toux (French Studies) and Margo Ballou (Slavic Languages); 1997-98 Sheridan Center Graduate Teaching Fellow*

This workshop sought ways to create a productive, non-threatening language classroom environment. A variety of concerns were raised: 1) error correction and feedback, 2) setting teaching goals, 3) integrating learning styles, skill levels, and backgrounds of students, 4) stimulating quality small-group interaction, 5) self-assessment, 6) student reluctance or intimidation, 7) teacher-centered vs. student-centered learning, and 8) classroom environment.

Some of the most important ideas that came out of this session are the following:

- Language learning is recursive, not linear: students may not be aware of the need for constant review. The more they understand about language learning, the better

equipped they will be to thrive in the language classroom. Even the ground rules of the class should be recursive, referred to in order to keep the class on track, especially in the first week. Language learning is like gardening or physical fitness; you have to keep working on it, or you lose the benefits.

- Some teachers tend to be frightened by the potential of group work for making it appear that the class is not "on track." First, instructors should allow thinking time in group interaction; if groups are not talking for a few moments, don't panic. If students are talking animatedly but clam up when you walk past, you can either attempt to stimulate discussion (ask leading questions) if you think they need help, or simply move on to the next group. Teachers must give a clear structure for all small-group interaction, and be certain to have a way to cover the material when the whole class reconvenes. Faculty can also help students become more familiar with each other by encouraging students to ask questions of each other.

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## **6. Promoting Reflective Teaching: The Role of Teaching Resource Centers**

*Suzanne Barrett, Ph. D.(Brown, English), Director of the Boston College Faculty Resource Center, and former Sheridan Center Graduate Teaching Fellow*

The session focused on what the ideal teaching resource center might look like. Major topics included: goals, functions, space, personnel and success.

Among the most important goals are: participation from and active engagement on the part of teachers at all levels - from the TA to the junior and senior faculty; maintaining an image of an asset-driven center, not a remedial one; maintaining respect for and support of disciplinary integrity as well as differences and cross-fertilization among disciplines; facilitating links between content and pedagogy; assisting in bringing out the best in the teacher - novice to experienced; speaking to different disciplinary styles; keeping abreast of different and new ideas and methodologies; helping teachers deal with different kinds of problems in the classroom (disruptive behavior, for example) as well as providing a safe haven for exploring solutions to such issues.

Important functions identified are: to articulate to the administration the worth of a teaching resource center to the institution and the academic community at large; to provide forums for exchange of ideas and communication between graduate students and faculty; to provide for individual consultation and conferences on teaching and feedback; to help make connections between teaching and research; to keep the issue of the importance of investing in teaching before the academic community through conferences, forums, workshops, microteaching demonstrations, etc.; to provide resources and connections for

learning outside the classroom; to support research on teaching; to help integrate the activities of the various groups on campus that deal with questions relating to teaching.

Discussion on space centered around the need for an attractive, central, visible, accessible location for the center, one with climate control, good lighting, a variety of spaces in which to carry out the diverse activities of the center.

We discussed the personnel: a director with a faculty appointment to set the tone - one who has a good general background, co-directors for research and administration, advisors, representation/ resource people with different points of view and from different disciplines and areas, who are able to utilize the resources of the center and the institution in a meaningful way, faculty liaisons to departments, and graduate fellows.

Some of the indicators of success that we identified are more tangible than others: that people end up feeling or continue to feel that there is value in teaching and that they are doing the best that they can; that graduate students leave Brown as advocates, some going off to direct activities similar to those of the Sheridan Center; that graduate students and faculty continue to participate in the activities of the center; that many levels of participants and all levels of teachers, from TAs to seasoned faculty, are reached; that the center's mission gets incorporated into the mission of the institution.

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## **7. Communication and Collaboration: Using the Web to Design Materials to Improve Teaching and Learning**

*Roger Blumberg (Sr. Hypermedia Researcher, Scholarly Technology Group, Brown University)*

Mr. Blumberg presented participants with an overview of the web, its various features, and the manner in which they could be incorporated into the university classroom. Importantly, he stressed that while there is enormous potential to bring new resources into the classroom and to forge collaborative relationships across disciplines and campuses, instructional goals should remain the criteria against which to evaluate the merits of any new technology, i.e., they should not be used simply because they are there. Specifically, participants were introduced to the Sheridan Center's new website [<http://Sheridan-Center.stg.brown.edu>], and the range of materials and services now available via the web to Brown faculty and graduate students interested in improving their teaching skills.

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## **8. Why Should Faculty Teach to Variations in Learning Style?**

*Prof. Brian Hayden (Psychology)*

Prof. Hayden discussed variations in people's learning styles (which are not to be confused with learning disabilities). Some of us, he explained, process information in a sequential, linear-semantic, or visual manner, while others are visual-spatial, non-linear divergent thinkers. Some learn best by hearing, some by doing, other by seeing. Importantly, these differences have nothing to do with intelligence. Participants were given a series of simple tests to determine their preferred learning style, and explored the implications of the resulting variance for teaching and assessment, especially of large numbers of students. Some useful approaches to obviating these concerns are to teach in "multiple modalities," i.e., use a range of teaching strategies and inputs, and to incorporate different forms of assessment in determining a student's final grade.

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## **9. Disciplinary Differences: Rewriting Alice in Wonderland**

*Prof. Rhoda L. Flaxman (Writing Fellows Program)*

Prof. Flaxman identified six general points she intended to address in this session (ranging from use of evidence, to structure, to the nature of the audience of one's writing). Her goal was to discuss and make explicit conventions of writing in different disciplines. In addition to the discussion, writing assignments in the session were designed to help us achieve this goal.

After a general discussion on the writing conventions in different disciplines (for example, the sciences use an impersonal voice, the writer distances him/herself from the work; Anthropology uses a more personal voice and the writer's bias is more evident. The first writing exercise involved rewriting a passage from Alice in Wonderland. We then discussed actual essay questions used at Brown, and their strengths and/or weaknesses. The outcome of the session was that it is very difficult to determine what is universal about writing. Flexibility is necessary to teach students to identify their own biases. Specificity with use of verbs in assignments invites creativity and/ or personal opinion but often depends on the convention of the discipline involved.

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## **10. Student Journals**

*Prof. Jonathan Waage (Ecology and Evolutionary Biology)*

The session was held as a roundtable discussion. Prof. Waage spent about 10-15 minutes at the beginning explaining why and how he uses student journals in his animal behavior course (a handout outlining this information and including overviews of the journal exercises assigned to students was given out). In addition, while the discussion was going on several (anonymous) journals were passed around for participants to examine. Some of the major uses of journals that were outlined by Prof. Waage include: to encourage different ways of thinking (e.g. non-linear); for self-reflection; as a way to exchange ideas with other students, and with the instructor; an indicator to the teacher of student progress that supplements traditional assessment tools such as exams; provides instructor with feedback on course materials (e.g. the text); journals can be used to comment on literature; journal assignments can be used as a basis for papers

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## 11. Effective Feedback on Student Presentations

*Prof. Nancy R. Dunbar, (Theatre Speech and Dance and Director, The Sheridan Center) and Patricia H. Hamm, Ph. D. (Brown University, Chemistry), former Sheridan Center Graduate Teaching Fellow*

This workshop began by asking why we have student participation: why don't we just do all the talking ourselves? Answers were that we want to encourage active learning, we learn from what students say, and students learn and develop oral skills by teaching.

So, if student participation is so great, why don't we ask for more of it? For one thing, bad experiences with student participation can condition us against it. We have time constraints; sometimes there are language issues, low oral competence on the students' part, even student resistance; and finally, we are simply socialized to get up in front of the classroom and talk, because that's how most of our teachers taught us.

Nancy Dunbar and Patricia Hamm passed out two oral presentation assignments for session participants to discuss in small groups, attempting to read the assignments as students might read them. In the small groups and in the subsequent large-group discussion it became abundantly clear that instructors needed to be as explicit as possible in informing students of their expectations. Students need to know not only the mechanical details about researching and preparing an oral presentation, but also how long the presentation should last, and even the fact that they are expected to practice their presentations. To create opportunities for student practice, instructors could set up teams that would hear one another's presentations. Brown has Rhetoric Fellows who can help students with presentations. If time permits, instructors could also offer to preview presentations for students who are nervous about speaking in front of an audience.

Instructors should also be clear and explicit not only about expectations, but also about how the presentations will be evaluated. A teacher might model an effective presentation for students. He or she might even ask students what they look for in a presentation and how they would want to be evaluated. In some classes students design their own evaluation forms. Sharing feedback and criticism can be problematic. The workshop discussed this issue, and participants were provided with a handout of strategies for addressing it in the classroom. Instructors should "own" their messages, making "I" statements rather than generalizing for all listeners, to allow for other possible reactions. Do not be the sole source of feedback; invite other listeners to comment. Distinguish between observations, inferences, and judgments. Balance positive and negative comments, connecting them with "and" instead of "but": "I liked your speech, and you could improve..." To help them incorporate oral presentations in their classes where appropriate, participants received a number of handouts. Copies are available at the Center.

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## **12. Teaching with Technology**

*Lynne O'Brien, Manager, Computing Resource Center and Facilities*

This session demonstrated ways that technology can improve the learning environment, offers new approaches for communication, and provide opportunities for designing innovative teaching strategies. The possible uses of technology in teaching can be thought of as a hierarchy of increasing complexity. The use of computer generated slide presentations in lectures increases readability and student interest. Peer interaction among teaching colleagues and students can be increased through the use of discussion groups and e-mail. Course homepages with appropriate links can be valuable for accommodating different learning styles, distance education, and simulation and training. All use of technology with teaching requires specific thought about the clear definition of a goal, increased teacher preparation, and anticipation of the student's experience.