

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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Faculty Forum: Teaching Innovations

Faculty have wonderful ideas to share with colleagues about the innovations they have introduced into their classrooms. With this issue, the Center offers a sampling of some of the contributions sent in by colleagues across the University: Harold Ward (Environmental Science), Masako Fidler (Slavic Languages), Alan Zuckerman (Political Science), Jan Tullis (Geological Sciences) and Bil Johnson (Education). We hope that YOU will be inspired by these ideas to share yours in the next Teaching Exchange. Ed.

Web-based Reporting of Student Work

HAROLD WARD (*Environmental Studies*)

I think the recent innovation that has had the greatest impact on my students is the use of the Web to report their results – from a service-learning class (e.g. ES192 or ES201) or senior or master’s theses. Like most teaching techniques, this does not work in all situations, and so the examples I’ll give of class projects are a year or two old. A strong majority of thesis writers now prefer the Web – it gives their work immediate and wide-spread visibility – much more effective distribution than traditional publication.

I’d be pleased to discuss this approach with any interested Brown faculty member. I find that particularly for group project work, the construction of the Web report is a great way to integrate project teams and to bring the class together.

For examples, use the following hyperlinks (please access from the Center’s Website):

- [Theses](#)
- Coordinated theses
<http://envstudies.brown.edu/projects/urban/>
<http://envstudies.brown.edu/land/>
- Class project reports
<http://envstudies.brown.edu/classes/es192/index.htm>
<http://envstudies.brown.edu/classes/ES201/2000/index.html>

Building Reading Strategies Across the Curriculum

MASAKO FIDLER (*Slavic Languages*)

Brown is a place where students come from all corners of the world. It has been a place that encourages students to pursue individual academic interests. Courses can be customized to students' needs and interests. As a university-college, Brown is unique in involving undergraduate students in highly specialized research. In this environment, enhancing students' intellectual interaction with any text – an important aspect of teaching for faculty of all disciplines – is by no means simple. Different readers have different sets of assumptions and knowledge. Thus, when they look for information that is most relevant to him/her, a normal approach in processing information, their interpretations may vary. Sometimes the reader may not be able to find the context where the text is meaningful to him/her. The common reaction in such situations is “So what?” or “It doesn't make sense.” Take, for example, a simple text of the following type: “She took out a nail clipper and started cutting her nails. She knew it was already evening, but it didn't bother her. Her parents were upset.” Unless the reader is familiar with a superstition that clipping one's nails in the evening causes his/her parents to die, the connection among these three sentences does not become clear. Moreover, the reader may easily conclude that the person was not bothered by the lack of light while clipping her nails, and that her protective parents were worried about her cutting the nails badly or damaging her eyesight.

Terms such as “McDonald's” or “quarter-pounder” in the following text would not mean anything to a reader who is not familiar with American fast-food: “He went into McDonald's. The quarter-pounder sounded good and he ordered it.” For such a reader, additional information needs to be supplied: “He went to a place where food is cooked and sold. It is called McDonald's. There he saw ground meat which was formed into patties, fried, and...” (Examples from Blakemore, 1987)

Reading of a text clearly involves adding information, searching for equivalent cultural counterparts, contrasting components in different cultures. In practical terms, however, there is no time for the teacher to stop at every line or paragraph and help students negotiate the meaning of each segment of text. Even if this is possible at times, the question remains as to how to actively involve students in this process.

Brown University On-line [Czech Anthology](#) is a response to such needs in an area where these issues are particularly acute: study of a less commonly taught language and culture. It demonstrates how technology enables students to effectively interact with literary texts. Each literary text on the Web is equipped with a hierarchy of multiple links to facilitate negotiation of meaning in the relevant cultural context. Questions at the beginning of each text segment encourage students to actively look for the information that is crucial to

understanding the main structure of the text. Many questions inspire students to contrast the actions and views in the text and their anticipations in a similar situation; differences between the two opens up a discussion of the cultural motivations for certain events and views in the classroom. Other links supply information about the author, historical and cultural background, and the nature of the text and different interpretations of the text at different times in history. Sound files containing texts enforce literary and linguistic associations. These features equip students and the instructor with tools to build a basis for productive discussion in the classroom.

The anthology has found its audience in other institutions, such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which are not only interested in using the material, but in participating in its further development. Its structure and educational principles have been recognized and appreciated at national conferences and seminars.

The project, headed by Masako Fidler (*Slavic Languages*) with expertise in technology provided by David Kanig (*Center for Language Studies*), has been supported by UTRA scholarships, Wriston Curriculum Development grant, Francis Wayland Collegium Grant, and campus-based and consortium-based grants from the Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning. The Department of Czech Literature and Literary Theory at Charles University in Prague has been an active collaborator in this project from its inception.

Foundations of Political Analysis: PS 50

ALAN S. ZUCKERMAN (*Political Science*)

The Foundations of Political Analysis (PS50) is my version of Introduction to Comparative Politics. I have been teaching the course for about twenty years, and by now it has become is my signature course at Brown. It embodies my rules of teaching: (1) Always emphasize modes of thought. (2) Always teach skills. (3) Never emphasize “names, dates, and places.” (4) Always teach to the top of the class. (5) Never teach material that I find boring. Because the course is not about the politics of anything or anywhere, I feel no obligation to cover material about any particular place or substantive topic. Rather, I try to teach students how political scientists do political science.

PS50 has a distinctive place in our department’s curriculum. First designated as “highly recommended” and now listed as one of three required courses, just about all political science concentrators take it. Because most students take political science in order to further their interests in substantive topics and because hardly any of them care about the discipline of political science, most students find the course confusing, at best. “Why are we doing this, when I want to learn more about the Congress, the environment, globalization, or some other favorite? Why am I here, when I would much prefer a course about politics,

not about political science?" These questions appear on most students' faces on the first day, and some of these quizzical looks never leave. (Some articulate their feelings directly.) Remember that at Brown, there are no university-wide distribution requirements, so students hardly ever take courses because they "must," and faculty almost never teach students who "don't want to be there." And so confusion about the course's topic interacts with resentment of its quasi-obligatory status to offer a strong test of my teaching abilities. I have already alluded to my approach to this challenge. I advance. I do not retreat. What does that mean in practice? I teach in a way that stretches the student's general intellectual abilities. The implicit message of the course (the sub-text as they now say) is that smart and committed students are able and should want to master this material, and one measure of how bright and dedicated you are is how well you do in PS 50. As I keep myself from being bored (principle 5 above) and I teach to the top of the class (principle 4 above), I challenge these bright and hard-working students to stay with me.

Does it work? I think so. As one should expect, students vary in their ability and willingness to learn the material (and my Teaching Assistants and I vary in how well we convey it). Some catch on immediately and slice through the material like a hot knife through butter. Some never "get it," remaining confused all seminar long (and most of these fail the course). As the semester progresses, most catch on, and some of these are pleased with the accomplishment, while others decide that they did not want to know all that much about political science. There are other measures: Not only have the course's graduates gone on to exceptional careers (not uncommon at Brown), but several are accomplished political scientists in their own right, teaching at leading colleges and universities across the country. Occasional anecdotes reaffirm the point. Consider also the comments of a student, who had just decided to switch her concentration from biology to political science. "The course is the political science equivalent of organic chemistry. If you can do PS50, you can do any course in the department." All told, I have been very satisfied with the learning and teaching in the Foundations of Political Analysis. (A fuller version of this article will be published elsewhere.)

Office Hours Versus Drop-in Hours

JAN TULLIS (*Geological Sciences*)

My colleague Karen Fischer and I share a moderately large enrollment (80-90) introductory geology course (Geo 22), taught in fall semester, which typically has an enrollment of one-third first-year students. We would like to personalize the course as much as possible, and get students to 'talk geology' and practice critical thinking and geological reasoning. But, many first-year students are very reluctant to come to

professors' office hours. We have had great success in the last few years since we replaced office hours with drop-in sessions.

These drop-in hours are: (1) held in 'neutral territory', e.g. a small seminar room, not a professor's office; (2) held in the same room on each day of the week, rather than a different professor's or TA's office; (3) held during one scheduled hour (but a different hour) on each day, from Monday through Friday with a faculty member or graduate TA always present; (4) designed to encourage students to come in pairs or small groups, and (5) designed as active and collaborative learning sessions. We explain why we think it is important for them to try to verbalize what they do, and do not, understand, and to try to answer one another's questions. We resist the impulse to give them the answers they seek, but rather try to guide them to figure out things for themselves. We always remind the students at the beginning of each lecture about the time of the drop-in session for that afternoon and the following day. And sometimes we provide cookies. This system does not take any more of our time than office hours, and, for this class and our goals, it seems to work a lot better.

Can Large Classes Only Be Taught Through Lecturing?

(Answer: No)

BIL JOHNSON (*Education*)

While there is clearly great value in imparting knowledge to students directly through lecturing, there are several unintended consequences this method brings with it. First, when lecture courses break into sections TAs all too often follow the model they have observed and tend to dominate the talking in their smaller group. Second, but more significant educationally, students get far too little opportunity to exchange their own ideas about the subjects they are studying.

There are several methods and techniques worth considering when working with a large (over 30 students) class. Whether a class is meeting several times a week for 50 minutes or only once for two-plus hours, thinking about the students being active, engaged learners (rather than passive recipients of information) is crucial to designing classes. Listed below are several ideas which could be incorporated into large classes where lecturing might be the primary mode of instruction but needn't be the only one.

1. Use TAs during class time: to break the class into smaller groups, even for short periods of time. TAs can facilitate discussion or problem-solving groups. For example, in a class designed to revolve around questions (rather than simply providing information or "answers"), groups of students can discuss those questions and report out their ideas or findings. The professor can then gauge whether

students are “getting” the material and may also discover students can provide insight to the material that might not have arisen otherwise.

2. Divide the class so equal numbers of students read different (and even conflicting) texts for the same class meeting. The professor can then use a “jigsaw” approach. First, those students who have read the same text meet together and respond to “prompts” the professor has prepared (possibly asking them to critique the text in some way). Then the class reconfigures (jigsaws) so that one member of each text group (it could be as many as four or six texts being used) meets with one member of every other text group. The reconfigured groups then “teach” each other about their text, ask questions of each other about texts, etc. while the professor and TAs can sit-in or listen in to see if the students are grasping the material, etc.
3. Think about each class being an individual event (not one lecture in a series) driven by the question, “What will students know at the end of this class and what will they be able to do with that knowledge (or, what will they be expected to do with the knowledge)? In thinking about the answer to that question, one might incorporate the group work described in 1 & 2 above.
4. Get regular feedback from students. This can be as simple as asking students to fill out a 3 x 5 card at the end of a class session which asks them to respond to two simple prompts: What was one new thing you learned today? What is one question today’s class raised for you?

There are many more methods and techniques like the ones suggested above (in a math class, for example, let the students show how they solved a problem rather than always having the instructor show them. Again, one might learn more about the students as learners this way since we all know the professor can do the problem correctly!). The real key is deciding to add some variety and active learning to a classroom.