

Faculty Learning Community Portfolio  
Summer 20084

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### *Why do I teach?*

Well, the extra money is good. But it's a lot of hard work, so there must be more to it than the money.

I do it because it makes me a better human being. Seriously. It is beyond anything I have ever done. I used to work closely with recent college graduates in TV news – I would have to hire them and mentor them, and teach them some tricks of the trade. Teaching in a classroom is so much more than that.

In a work place, you constantly have teachable moments. In the classroom, those teachable moments, or learning cues that aid in retention of the subject matter, usually have to be manufactured by you. Therein lies a creative challenge. Handling a classroom, influencing young individual's futures, getting through to them and making the material "stick"-- for eleven weeks in a row, three hours at a time, is much different from a newsroom, where you may have years to groom that individual. At RIT, you have only eleven weeks to make an impression with your enthusiasm, the course material, and your experience.

Plus, the atmosphere is different than a "real world" workplace. The goal is purely to learn and improve yourself and those around you. You feel the excellence around you in a higher education setting, and you are compelled to match that excellence. Sources of that inspirational excellence are faculty, academic services staff, and students who are inquisitive, seeking factual, reliable and credible knowledge. You feel a pressure, I want to say – but it's a good pressure, a healthy, kick-in-the-butt pressure – to be as effective as possible.

Once in a while, a former student will contact me. Not many have – maybe five – but I am impressed that they sought me out for advice, opinion, and information after their classroom experience with me was over. One just wanted to point out to me a persistent grammar error on a corporate website; another asked me to look at her cover letter; another had me speak to before a group of young teen students in a summer inner-city journalism program. Such experiences make me believe that I got through to some of them.

As well, I believe the environment fosters a desire to succeed at all levels – as an instructor, as a student, as a researcher, as a support staff member. And this desire to succeed (meaning my students have taken away, retained, and will use the best practices I taught) makes me a better instructor and a better person.

### *My teaching metaphor*

As for a teaching metaphor – I choose "guide". This is *not* in reference to the phrase "guide on the side", so often used to describe the opposite of "sage on the stage". I picture myself as a guide on a path. The path is the student's college career. I am one of many they run into. I can offer my experience, based on what I encountered on that path, and what they will encounter when they finish – when they "get out of the woods" of college.

As a guide, they can take my advice and use it – or not. I offer it for all interested. I *hope* they take it, because that path is fraught with challenges in which

my advice will be handy – and it will help them to overcome challenges they do not know exist yet.

### *Teaching project*

I became an adjunct at the Rochester Institute of Technology fall 2008, teaching Technical Communication in the Packaging Science program. I concentrated greatly on “filling time”, it seemed – making sure each class contained valuable, credible lessons – the lessons were very teacher-focused and content-oriented (Entwhistle, 1999). Though my student reviews came back positive, I knew I had to engage the students more in active learning, instead of serving as “a loading dock where information is conveniently laid out for distribution” (Weigel, cited in Bird, et al, pg 581).

Now, I am more familiar with the requirements of adjunct instruction: the time commitment, the effort commitment, and the awesome commitment we all have to create a positive, lasting and useful impact on students’ lives – particularly in a writing course, when the material should serve them in any profession.

I had group assignments, I used real-world examples of good and bad technical writing, and of course I gave writing assignments. But the students should have been doing more writing in smaller steps that instill confidence, and prove to them the worth of learning how to communicate clearly and effectively.

I realized I wanted to achieve Deep Learning. More than rote memorization or regurgitation of facts of formatting, grammar, or spelling, I wanted the material to have a lasting impression on the students.

### Literature Review

There exist many definitions of “Deep Learning”. Smith and Colby (2007) state it plainly as “deeper levels of understanding” (p. 205). Citing Martin and Saljo (1976), whom the authors credit with performing the original research on deep versus surface learning, Smith and Colby (2007) further define deep learning in terms of an opposite of surface learning, which is “minimum engagement with the task, typically a focus on memorization or applying procedures that do not involve reflection, and usually an intention to gain a passing grade” (p. 206). Grauerholz (2001) centers on holistic learning. Citing McLeod (1996), deep learning is defined by the author as “profound, meaningful, and lasting shifts in cognition, attitudes, emotions and values” (p. 44). Citing King (1996), Hunt (2003) defines deep learning in the context of three strata: surface strategies, or rote learning; achieving strategies (doing one’s best for the highest grade only); and deep strategies, which develop competence in, and interest in, the subject. Along the same line of surface vs. deep learning, Entwhistle (1999) states some students “see learning as a way to establish personal meaning, by *transforming* the incoming information and ideas in relation to their existing knowledge and experience” (p. 10). This review is by no means exhaustive.

“Deep learning”, then, employs a number of strategies and tactics in and out of the classroom that seek to engage the learner intellectually, emotionally, even

physically, utilizing a learner's previous experiences, out-of-the-classroom "real life" contexts, and visual and oral "cues" in the classroom, and many others to impart subject knowledge, with the goal that the information and lessons resonate with the students far beyond the final grade.

Why make deep learning a goal for my class? I came to the realization that I had too much lecture, and show and tell, in my teaching style. In my first year of adjunct instruction at RIT, I was new to teaching. I set a modest goal the first year of keeping up with the workload, the pressure to become a professional educator who was fair and stern, and committed to passing on skills that are based in best practices for the modern workplace and careers. But were those skills resonating – "sticking" – with the students? The ability to communicate clearly and completely in a written and oral form is, undeniably, a skill that serves the individual in nearly any professional career. And I am teaching future scientists, in the Packaging Science program. As Walvoord (1986), citing Enke, states:

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of writing in the professional life of a scientist. The amount of time my colleagues and I spend writing is out of all proportion to the fraction of our training devoted to developing writing skills. ...The tasks of writing fall heavily on industrial scientists as well (p. 3).

I tell students that well-developed communication skills will serve them well in any course or career choice. Therefore, I feel a professional and personal duty to ensure the lessons I impart can live up to that statement. My burden of responsibility is made greater by the fact that this may be the only professional writing course they encounter in their undergraduate experience at RIT, so I have only one crack at them.

But the challenge remains of making the *experience* of learning to write and present technical information in a business setting one that is, at the least, palatable to the student and, at the most, enjoyable and memorable; an experience that does not treat writing as a chore, a punishment, but a skill worth honing and embracing for a lifetime. Personal accounts from colleagues in the Faculty Learning Community indicate lectures, and the classroom teaching model of the "sage on the stage", have not been experienced in secondary schools by this current crop of undergraduates. They are more familiar with "hands-on" work, group work, and lessons delivered in short snippets of 15 minutes or so. As well, teaching off PowerPoint slides and relying on a rote regurgitation of facts in quizzes – in everything from grammar and usage to document formatting, email etiquette and audience analysis – is more likely to produce surface learning or an achievement strategy on the part of the student (Hunt, 2003). These learning models are not likely to engrain the necessary communications skills in the students.

Employing "deep learning" teaching methods provided a solution to this challenge. Like Hunt (2003), I must "do everything I can to make the course content and assignments relevant to students' lives" (p. 134). One example Hunt (2003) provides in teaching communication is to analyze communication phenomena encountered by students in their everyday lives. This I did starting in the spring

quarter 20084, assigning them to find two examples of technical communication – be they in writing, pictures, symbols, advertising, anywhere – and to analyze the source, audience and any related noise in that communication using the SMCR (sender, message, channel, receiver) model, and to post it in myCourses discussion forums for all the class to see. I encourage students to snap a digital picture of their subject and post it, as well. The goal was to demonstrate that a) technical communication is all around us; b) some messages are more or less effective than others; and c) analyzing these communications can help us find subtle sources of noise in either the sender, the message, the channel or the receiver that can impede these communications.

Inspiration and ideas for classroom techniques that may achieve a goal of deep learning have come from various sources. A guest speaker at the 2009 RIT Faculty Institute for Teaching and Learning mentioned a great idea: Break the class into groups, and provide the groups each with a can of Play-Doh. Tell them they can make anything they want with the modeling clay (one per group), but they must record how that object was constructed, and report those instructions back in a way such that anyone could make that same object. This, after a lecture on “functional writing” (writing intended to communicate instructions or troubleshooting advice). The intentional learning outcome is for the students to experience the construction of a piece of functional writing “from the ground up”, that is, from product inception to consumer consumption. My hope, too, is that students find it fun and get caught up in the flow of the moment (Grauerholz, 2001).

*Helping Students Write Well*, by Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord (1986) is a wealth of information for improving students writing skills that may also promote deep learning. Examples include the one-minute paper in the middle of class. Students may be asked to write their reactions to the subject matter, then share with class to promote discussion. Another example is the end-of-class written summary. This can increase a student’s listening and note-taking skills. My idea is to use this technique in my course. I am strongly considering giving out rewards for the most complete end-of-class summary as incentives (these would include tokens for Java Wally’s, etc.). These and other exercises hopefully will lead to discovery by students of best practices in technical communication, therefore creating cues for learning points.

Walvoord (1986) also provides tips for writing assignments that, I believe, could provide more of a sense of “ownership” of the work for the student, provide more of a sense of accomplishment, leading to deep learning. It also, quite plainly, is learning by doing. This includes more small steps in the writing process of any given document or assignment that lead incrementally to a finished product. This includes rough drafts written in class, reviewed by a peer for content, flow and spelling; those same rough drafts will be examined by me, with copious margin notes for improvement, or encouragement (I already hand-grade most high-stakes writing assignments).

Other examples of my attempts to create deep learning experiences are highlighted in my syllabus for 20091. I plan to implement these changes immediately.

### *Assessment*

I added rubrics for discussion postings and high-stakes writing assignments. I will also view course assessments on student evaluation forms. I already hand-correct and grade high-stakes writing exercises, examining them closely. I can look for significant improvements in their writing assignments over last year's classes, though differences may be subtle. I also plan to use a mid-quarter survey this academic year, to track concerns and "alter my course" if necessary (using the metaphor in a navigational sense). I suspect, too, if I see more intense interest on the faces of my students, that that would be a fair assessment tool.

Grauerholz (2001) states "no activity or professor can guarantee that students will experience deep learning. What instructors can do, however, is create fertile conditions (p. 45). She sums up the ultimate assessment: "...we may suspect it has occurred when students insist that our course changed how they look at life" (p. 44).

### *Reflections on my participation in a Faculty Learning Community*

This was a worthwhile endeavor. My first impulse was to join to hear what was on the minds of fellow adjuncts. I heard their points of view often on their foibles and troubles, but I gained more from the sharing of teaching and course development ideas.

It was important that I kept an open mind – and mine was way open when it came to ideas. I learned *a lot* from certain members, while others were more valuable to have in the group just for comic relief! One reason I enjoyed the group was the commonality: we're all adults with day jobs, sometimes overjoyed and sometimes perplexed and frustrated by our teaching experiences, and all looking for ideas to improve ourselves.

I felt nearly all the lessons were valuable. The COE reference librarian's presentation was pretty dry. I would advise having Jen Freer present next time. She's more animated and, I think, innovative in serving her clientele.

The information I took away will stay with me for the rest of my life. The experience placed my teaching abilities on a higher level. I believe now I am closer to the goal of achieving excellence in teaching my course material and of understanding my students so I can make that material relevant to their lives.

## References

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