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laser insights, zany alternatives and riveting dialogue on teaching and learning

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## LEARNING IS A SOCIAL EXPERIENCE!

by Michael Sweet

*"Fear is the greatest learning disability." —Ned Hallowell*

You are the only Asian-American student in a class that requires quite a bit of math. On the first day, the teacher is explaining that he grades on a curve, and then jokes: "I'm sure Li is going to set the curve pretty high this term." Though you are not particularly good at math, and have never met this teacher before, you realize that he has singled you out in the eyes of your fellow students as "the-Asian-to-outscore" for the rest of the term.

You are the only male student in a women's literature class. One day in discussion a female student states matter-of-factly: "We need to face the fact that all men are potential rapists and interpret everything they say from that perspective." You feel your face flush, as if you have just been accused of something and are definitely not welcome in that class. You don't know what to do.

You are a returning student with two children, in a history class taught by a man much younger than you. To earn rapport with his students, the teacher often identifies with their age group, making references to "Our parents' generation," and "How the 'Boomers' have arranged things." Being a "Boomer" yourself,

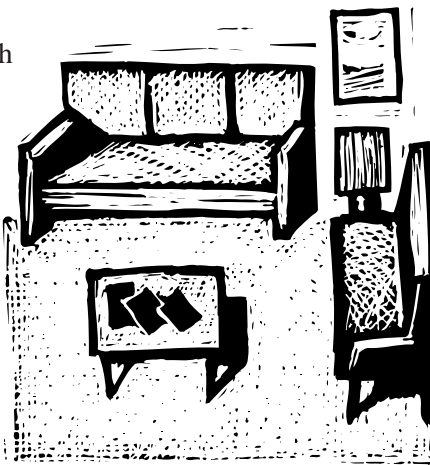
when he asks if anyone has ever "studied" the Vietnam War, you are not sure how much of your life's experience you feel safe sharing with the class. You didn't "study" it—you lived through it.

These are adaptations of real events that have occurred either here at UO, or on other college campuses. They are examples of how the social atmosphere of a class can freeze out individuals or groups, clearly telling them that they are neither welcomed, valued nor respected. Too often we can forget that learning is a social experience, and that maintaining an atmosphere conducive to healthy inquiry is the duty of any good teacher. To explore this problem and generate solu-

tions, the Teaching Effectiveness Program recently conducted a workshop titled "Welcoming, Valuing and Respecting Students: Creating an Inclusive Classroom."

The purpose of the workshop was to ask UO students of varying backgrounds for concrete suggestions about what teachers can do to create a class atmosphere in which moments like those listed above do not happen. We also heard from UO teachers, known for their inclusive teaching methods to

create an encouraging social atmosphere in their classroom. The workshop began with a conceptual address by Betty Schmitz, the Director of the Curriculum Transformation Project at the University of Washington. After Betty's address, the audience heard from the student panel and the faculty panel, and then finished the day with a chance to apply some of what they learned in a small group scenario activity.



The workshop produced two dozen concrete teaching suggestions aimed at generating a safe and inclusive social class atmosphere.

### **FIRST, A BIT OF CONTEXT**

The “diversity project” in higher education can be divided into two branches: curriculum transformation and behavior change. Curriculum transformation embeds different voices and perspectives into the fabric of individual courses or majors, providing students with a more robust set of cognitive tools and associations. For example, an American Literature course that incorporates writings of Native Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans and Chicanos will equip its students to bring a richer set of view-points and questions to any piece of literature they encounter in the future.

But valuing diverse perspectives and connections is not strictly the domain of the humanities or social sciences. Doug Hintz, a UO math instructor, expands his students’ understanding of mathematical thinking by asking his students to translate the Chinese version of “Pascal’s triangle” into the Western number set, “to show them that these concepts never were just a European thing.” Chemistry professor Geri Richmond reaches different kinds of students by illustrating her chemical concepts with a wide variety of examples, from pregnancy processes to internal combustion engines.

### **TEACHER BEHAVIOR AND THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM**

Though the vast majority of teachers are well-intentioned, many do not realize when they may be shutting out some of their students by ignoring, invalidating, or even offending them because they are different from what the teacher perceives as the “mainstream” student.

Some think that the fairest way to approach the situation is to just treat all our students the same. But

*should* we treat all our students the same? Is it valid to assume that all students learn the same way, using the same learning styles, the same cognitive access to the logics, metaphors and examples as I do? Probably not.

These questions often boil down to simple issues of concrete behavior, similar to “O.K. . . . so how do I do diversity? How do I know what to say or do, without constantly trying to second guess people I don’t even know?” Again and again, when approached with this dilemma, people from almost every conceivable background reply with two words of advice: “Ask us.”

A sincere, curious question can be seen as a validation of difference and an invitation to be different. “Asking” was the goal of the recent TEP workshop, and the following list of “answers” was generated by the students and faculty who participated that day:

1) *Avoid the “resident expert” example.* Because you have a few students from visibly diverse backgrounds in your class, don’t call on them to speak for all of “their people.” Let them volunteer their perspective if they so desire.

**BECAUSE YOU HAVE A FEW STUDENTS FROM VISIBLY DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS IN YOUR CLASS, DON’T CALL ON THEM TO SPEAK FOR ALL OF “THEIR PEOPLE.” LET THEM VOLUNTEER THEIR PERSPECTIVE IF THEY SO DESIRE.**

2) *Ask before you assume.* If you think a student’s background might afford him/her a different and important perspective on a class topic, approach the student individually and ask the student first if he/she would be interested and/or comfortable speaking to that topic in class.

3) *Beware of “us-them” relationships.* Do not set up

“us-them” relationships to win acceptance by your class. For example, in an attempt to generate rapport with his class, one young teacher set up an “us-them” relationship between “us, the class,” and “them, our parents.” “Ask your parents this. . . “ or “Talk to your parents for that. . . “ which excluded and sometimes offended the returning student in the class who was in fact a parent.

4) *Access the experience in the room.* If you have returning students in your classroom, validate their experience and draw upon it to help you teach.

5) *Use “we” to own many perspectives.* You need not be an African American from a rural area to propose the question: “As an African American family in rural Oregon, how would you feel about this? One might feel . . . “

6) *Think about students’ other needs.* For example, students with children will have special needs on days that the UO campus stays open, but other campuses close. Do not schedule a mid-term for President’s Day.

7) *Do not “target” difference.* If your course content invites discussion of different perspectives, do not lump all those different perspectives together, to be talked about on one day. For example, do not schedule a day for “minority views on Employment Law”; instead continually thread those perspectives into discussion throughout your course. “As a lesbian, how might a person feel about this law?”

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8) *Learn and use students’ names.* It connects you to him/her as individuals rather than just “some student in one of my classes.” Learn to pronounce the names

which are difficult as best you can. This can be hard, but even the effort is a step in the right direction.

9) *Generate inclusive expectations* from the very first day. Talk about what is appropriate in class discussion, and if possible have the students generate a list of class norms. Even if your class is all White, demand and enforce norms of dialogue respectful to all groups.

10) *Discuss stereotypes vs. generalities.* Stereotypes provide premature and often deceptive “answers” about a group that blind you to individuals. Generalities can prompt inquiry into individual differences. Be aware of stereotypical thinking in your thoughts and your communication (e.g., expecting Asians to be good at math).

11) *Provide access for students with disabilities.* Include in your syllabus an invitation for students with disabilities to contact you for accommodation.

12) *Let students introduce themselves.* Encourage your students to introduce themselves to you, and make a personal connection. Some teachers require all their students to come to their office hours at least once in the first two weeks. This requires that they find the office and allows you or your GTFs to make brief, personal contact with them all.

13) *Interact* with your students as much as possible during lecture. In addition to being a pedagogically sound teaching style, greater levels of interaction will make you feel closer to your students, making it easier for you to see and appreciate the differences among them.

14) *Connect to other cultures.* Connect your field to other cultures. For example, a math teacher shares how certain mathematical principles with European names were actually discovered by the Chinese long before the Europeans.

- 15) *Vary examples.* When explaining a concept, use several different kinds of examples of interest to different kinds of students. For example, when discussing chemical reactions, a chemistry teacher uses examples from internal combustion engines to human pregnancy.
- 16) *Use eye contact.* Continually make eye contact with individual students—they appreciate the moments of “personal” attention.
- 17) *Gatekeep.* Manage the levels of classroom interaction so that comments may be heard from students other than those who are most aggressive.
- 18) *Check in when they check out.* When you see that you are losing a student (i.e., he is staring, glazed, or starting to read the Emerald), check in with him and ask how he is doing. If it does not feel appropriate to do this in class, catch him after class and just ask how he's doing. The personal attention can open doors for you and the student.
- 19) *Explain class participation.* On the first day of class, clarify what you mean by “class participation.” Will you require your students to talk? If so, tell them, and let them know that anyone who is not comfortable with that for cultural or personal reasons should come see you and arrange some other form of class participation (office hour visits, email, hand-written input, etc.) with you. Put this same information in your syllabus.
- 20) *Communicate with respect.* Reward everyone’s effort, even if they give a “wrong” answer. Take a moment to try and see what thinking led them to the “wrong” answer.
- 21) *Keep yourself in a learning mindframe.* Education is a two way street, and you have as much to learn from that room full of students as they have to learn from you. This will keep you open to new perspectives and keep the teaching experience exciting for you.
- 22) *Use small groups.* When organizing your students into small groups, always group them strategically. If you don’t, the likelihood of all the international students grouping together and all the “left-overs” grouping together can perpetuate the “us-them” thinking in

which stereotypes thrive.

- 23) *Allow students to contribute to the curriculum.* Encourage students to reflect on their experiences and bring readings, questions or issues from their own backgrounds to the class discussions. Validate the importance of other perspectives at an academic level.
- 24) *Change evaluations.* Encourage your department to include questions about inclusive / exclusionary teaching behavior on its end-of-quarter evaluations.

To learn more about the “Welcoming, Valuing and Respecting” workshop, contact Michael Sweet at 6-2123 or [mssweet@oregon](mailto:mssweet@oregon).

## **PORTABLE COMPUTER PROJECTION FOR CLASSROOMS**

by JQ Johnson

Many faculty find themselves in occasional need for computer projection as part of their courses. Perhaps you plan a single session that looks at online resources in your subject area, or perhaps a student presentation needs technical support. If you aren’t assigned to one of the few classrooms on campus with built-in computer projection, your best option may be to bring in the hardware you need. Several sources for such hardware exist around campus, including:

### **IMC**

The Instructional Media Center has several portable computer projection devices, including an InFocus

computer projector on a cart and a Sharp LCD panel. In addition, the IMC has operators who can deliver the hardware to your class and help you get it set up for the presentation. Note, however, that the IMC does not at this time have laptop computers available for loan; you'll need to provide your own laptop. Call the IMC at 6-1947 to reserve the equipment, or visit <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/imc/equdist.html>.



### **SSIL**

The Social Sciences Instructional Lab has a 3M computer projector and Windows 95 laptop available for class use, plus trained student staff who can deliver, set up, and return the equipment. See <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ssil/projector.cgi> for additional details. First priority for use of this hardware goes to CAS faculty.

### **FCN**

The Faculty Consultants Network has an LCD panel and Mac laptop available, primarily for use by FCN members. You'll need to provide the high-lumen overhead projector. Contact JQ Johnson, <mailto:jqj@darkwing> to schedule.

### **Science Library**

The Science Library has a high-resolution (1024x768) LCD panel

available for faculty use on campus. Contact Tim Klassen, <mailto:tklassen@darkwing> to schedule.

### **Colleges and departments**

Most of the schools and colleges (business, journalism, AAA, law, and education) and some CAS departments (e.g. physics, computer science) have projection hardware available for their own faculty. Check with your local computing support person or departmental office to find out what's available in your department.

If you know of additional hardware available to faculty beyond a single department, contact JQ Johnson, <mailto:jqj@darkwing>.

Whatever your source of hardware, you'll need a computer (with software appropriate to your particular application), a network connection, computer projection, a surface to project onto, and adequate lighting control in your classroom. Network connections are now routinely available in most, though not all, classrooms; if you don't see a jack labelled "UOnet" in your classroom, contact Network Services <mailto:nethelp@ns> to find out if your classroom is wired.

There are two major types of projection hardware available: LCD projectors (that include an internal light source) and LCD panels (that sit on top of an overhead projector). In general, LCD projectors produce much brighter images and are

useable in a wider range of classrooms. LCD panels require a high-lumen overhead projector (the overhead projector in your classroom is probably not bright enough) and very good lighting controls; they are typically only suitable for smaller classes, under 50 or so students. Most available projection hardware, by the way, is limited to 640x480 resolution — a much smaller logical screen than what you're probably used to on your own Mac, Windows PC, or X terminal. Most modern (purchased in the last 2 or 3 years) hardware displays at least thousands of colors and is active matrix, making it usable for display of computer animation. Most LCD projectors can also accept video inputs from a VCR.

One bit of general advice applies to any use of portable computer projection on campus: try it out in the classroom a few days before the first class where you'll be using it. Assembling all the various pieces in the room is the only way you can be sure that it will actually work in your environment.

If you need help in assessing the feasibility of using computer projection in a class or in locating equipment, contact JQ Johnson, <mailto:jqj@darkwing>.

## FIVE COOL THINGS YOU CAN DO WITH A COURSE WEB-SITE

by Michael Sweet

- 1) Provide a centralized, 24-hours a day, accessible location for course materials so those students who don't live on campus (e.g., a returning student with a job and a family) need not drive all the way across town at night for a one-page handout.
- 2) Provide sketchy lecture outlines that your students can use to organize their notes and fill out when you "flesh out" the outline with the substance of your lecture.
- 3) Provide on-line "guest speakers." Gilbert Stelter, at the University of Guelph in Ontario Canada, has on-line "Course Mentors" for his students. The mentors are located all over the world, and when Stelter's class is studying topics relating to their works, their bios appear on the web-page, and they become available to his students via e-mail to answer questions and discuss their work. <http://131.104.90.141/>
- 4) Get collective information from the students in your class. Ron Mitchell, here at the UO, surveys his students to learn where the class stands collectively on various issues. This tells him when it might be appropriate for him to take a viewpoint contrary to the majority of the class in order to communicate the true complexity of the concepts he is teaching.
- 5) Post discussion questions (and answers!) to prepare students for class, or exam-review materials (practice questions, important review themes, review times and locations, etc.) prior to the test.

If you are considering a course web-site, or want to modify your existing site, the Teaching Effectiveness Program's educational technology specialists make "house calls." For technical questions, our techs sit with you in your office, working with your computer,

answering your questions in one-on-one consultations. Similar one-on-one consultations are available for teaching questions (e.g., "How can I make my web-site most useful to the class?") TEP's professional staff is available to discuss with you how you can best prepare for a successful experience with educational technology. To schedule either a technical or a teaching house call, contact Michael Sweet at 6-2123 or [mssweet@oregon.uoregon.edu](mailto:mssweet@oregon.uoregon.edu).

*from Georgeanne*

Thank goodness for school breaks, eh?

I've been able to get to some of the articles in the pile of "things I should read" that sits behind my desk and grows at an alarming rate throughout the year. I'd like to share a summary of an article that particularly captured my interest. In addition, I want to pass on a unique way to handle your lecture notes, and a short faculty development human interest story.

### ***Building Critical Thinking Skills in Unexpected Ways***

This comes from an article in *College Teaching*, Summer 1996 Vol. 44, No. 3, ISSN 8756-7555

by Andy Young, who is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy at California State University, Stanislaus. The article is entitled *Introducing Critical Thinking at the College Level with Children's Stories*. TEP has the full text of this article and would be happy to share that with you if you want more detailed information.

Most of you have probably done enough teaching to know that good teachers borrow teaching ideas from a



multitude of sources, and children's stories have a great deal to offer higher education. You also know that "children's" stories can be deceptively simple and yet address very complex issues. The advantage of using children's stories to help develop critical thinking skills is that students can focus primarily on the skill building they initially need without the added challenge of working through difficult reading material.

Here's how Andy uses the story *Chicken Little* to help his beginning philosophy students get a handle on the kind of critical thinking they need to do in order to understand the more difficult philosophical texts they will be reading for the course.

The summary:

Chicken Little is picking up corn in the farm yard when an acorn falls on her head. She decides that the sky is falling and resolves to go and tell the king. Along the way she meets a variety of other fowl who ask to join in her quest. Finally, the group meets Foxy Loxy. Foxy Loxy assesses the situation and offers a shortcut to the king's palace. The birds readily agree and follow Foxy Loxy into her den where her hungry cubs are waiting. The story ends by noting that the king has never been told that the sky is falling.

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After presenting the story, Andy asks these questions:

1. What was the author trying to prove (the thesis)?
2. What steps in the author's line of reasoning prove this?
3. How does each step help to establish the thesis?
4. Are there any weaknesses in the line of reasoning?

There are a lot of ways you can go from here, and Andy explains in depth in his article how he uses this technique with his philosophy students. A graduate student in history used a similar approach using short two-paragraph editorials from the newspaper.

This is an excellent kind of first day of class activity. So often certain classes do not meet the first week of school because the assumption is that, for example, the discussion sections of a large lecture course would have nothing to discuss because the students had not yet attended the lecture. The first day of

class in a small group setting is the ideal time to devote to this kind of skill building —when there is no pressure to cover a certain amount of material. It also offers the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses in students regarding these important skills. Lastly, the instructor can concentrate on getting to know his or her students rather than on the content of the course.

***The Lecture Pacifier***

This one came from Gina Psaki. We were rehearsing her first lecture for the term as she had not taught a large lecture class before and was understandably nervous. I noticed that she had something small in her hand which looked sort of like a key ring. It turned out to be a set of lecture notes in a unique form. Color coded strips of paper (1 1/4" X 3") were joined together by a metal key ring. There must have been a hundred or more. On each strip was a key idea. As she moved through her lecture, she glanced down at the prompt and then flipped it over to the next one. It was smooth, discreet and extremely comforting for her to hold and finger with otherwise nervous hands that didn't know where to go. It also allowed her to move freely through the room. The color coding was helpful in the event that she needed to skip around for any reason. We think this is a tool that instructors use in Thailand and perhaps in many other places.

***Something Nice That Happened***

What we do does make a difference. This fall a new teacher in anthropology, Karen Kelsky, came to see me about her classes. She was teaching a 300 person intro course for the first time and wanted some help and suggestions in planning. Her teaching style is very interactive and she feared this would now be difficult with 300 students. I told her that she could, in fact, lecture and have good interaction with her students and let her borrow a videotape of Rick Zinbarg, psychology (which he has given TEP permission to loan) teaching a 250 person psychology course. The tape shows an unusual amount of student interaction for a class that size because of the teaching strategies Rick and his GTFs employ.

Karen came to see me at the beginning of this term to report her excitement about how well her large intro class had gone. She credited much of her success to having watched Rick's approach to his group.

So often we're sitting on the vein of gold without knowing it. There is such a wealth of teaching talent on our campus which could be shared. TEP would like to be the conduit for sharing these resources as often as possible.



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Editors: G. Cooper, M. Sweet  
Layout/ Design: G. Cooper  
Production: UO Printing, C. Berger, J. Sheppard

Contributors: G. Cooper, M. Sweet, JQ Johnson