



Teaching at USMA

Vol. 8 No. 7

Center for Teaching Excellence

January 2003

<http://www-internal.dean.usma.edu/centers/cte>

For the *New Semester* Why not Try Something *New?*

Here are some suggestions for things that might 'work' for you. . .



Draw a map

The cognitive map is a very common tool to help students visualize concepts and relationships among concepts, but why not have them create a "roadmap" for your course, perhaps modeled on Mapquest? That is, have students identify the destination (goals for learning) as well as their starting point (current knowledge in relation to those goals). What's the "path"? What kinds of things do they think will take them to their destination? Are they accurate? (Since you've traveled this path yourself in the past, you should be able to offer advice on the stages of the journey—i.e., what kinds of things does the learner have to do to reach that "destination"?). By creating a personal course map, students should gain a perspective on how this course might differ from other courses they've taken (in terms of demands on their time, nature of preparation for class, etc.) and see how they may have to adjust their study time to effectively reach that destination.

Identify Best Study Practices

As we pointed out in the December newsletter, one of the best uses of information about one's own learning style is to use those preferences to study more efficiently. Prior to the first class, you might ask your students to take an online survey and then talk about ways they can use this information to study better this semester.

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WHAT RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT IMPROVING UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION*

Twelve Attributes of Good Practice

Extensive research on American college students reveals several characteristics of what a high-quality undergraduate education experience looks like. These characteristics form twelve attributes of good practice in delivering undergraduate education. Evidence is strong that when colleges and universities systematically engage in these good practices, student performance and satisfaction will improve.

These characteristics of a high-quality undergraduate education are identified and summarized below under three major headings: organizational culture, curriculum, and instructional practice.

Attributes of Quality Undergraduate Education: What the Research Says

Quality begins with an organizational culture that values:

1. High expectations
2. Respect for diverse talents and learning styles
3. Emphasis on early years of study

A quality curriculum requires:

4. Coherence in learning
5. Synthesizing experiences
6. Ongoing practice of learned skills
7. Integrating education and experience

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Page 4 **Thoughts On Teaching**

WHAT RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT IMPROVING UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION *(Continued from page 1)*

Quality instruction builds in:

8. Active learning
9. Assessment and prompt feedback
10. Collaboration
11. Adequate time on task
12. Out-of-class contact with faculty

Quality begins with an organizational culture that values:

1. **High expectations.** Students learn more effectively when expectations for learning are placed at high but attainable levels, and when these expectations are communicated clearly from the onset. This principle is based on research indicating that when students are expected to take risks and perform at high levels, they make greater efforts to succeed. If this kind of encouragement is absent, students tend to choose “safe” learning alternatives that allow little room for developing their full potential.

In contrast to conventional notions of “academic rigor,” however, research indicates that students should not be left simply on their own to reach high standards; instead, both the institutional and its faculty members must set high expectations and make active efforts to help students meet them.

2. **Respect for diverse talents and learning styles.** Students come to college with vastly different backgrounds, levels of preparation, and previous experiences. It also is true that regardless of background, different students may learn most effectively in quite different ways. Good practice demands carefully designing curricula and instructional efforts to meet these diverse backgrounds and learning styles. Not only should individual ways of learning be respected and students allowed to capitalize on their strengths, but diversity itself should be harnessed for the insights it can provide on the subject matter taught. Instructional approaches that actively tap prior student and faculty experiences, and highlight the differences in those experiences, can be particularly helpful.

3. **Emphasis on the early years of study.** A consensus is emerging that the first years of undergraduate study—particularly the freshman year—are critical to student success. This idea partly reflects the fact that the transition from high school to postsecondary study represents a major discontinuity in both expectations and behavior for most students. Not only are standards higher but students also are expected to work harder and make major choices about their course of study. For adult students returning to the unfamiliar world of postsecondary study after many absent years, the shock of transition can be particularly abrupt. Yet, the pattern of resource allocation at most colleges and universities strongly favors upper-division work. Comprehensive efforts to integrate first-year students into the mainstream of collegiate experience often are treated as auxiliary experiences, just the reverse of what a growing body of research indicates as “best practice.”

[To be continued next month]

Note: The specific attributes of good practice in undergraduate education distilled in this essay we are serializing are neither new nor little known. They are the following:

- *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education.* National Institute of Education (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984).
- “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,” by Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Farnson. *AAHE Bulletin*, March 1987.
- *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights From Twenty Years of Research*, by Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991).

One of the major problems with educational research is how rarely its findings make their way to the classroom level. And one reason why that happens is the tendency for faculty members to look at the research findings and say, “Oh, we do those things” rather than question whether they might be less effective than they imagine. For example, we might question ourselves in relation to this first section on organizational culture.

Are our “high expectations” realistic? Or do we sometimes have unrealistic expectations and then simply adjust our reward system to however the cadets perform?

Do we have a systematic way to gauge the level of our expectations to insure that they are neither unrealistically high or too low?

Do we really tap into the diversity of our students? For example, we profess to be interested in cadet knowledge of other cultures. How well do we use the valuable resource that international cadets bring to USMA?

Do we welcome diversity in thinking—or insist on the “approved solution” or the specific one favored by the instructor?

How well do we address the issues of the transition from high school to college in terms of academic performance? Do we regularly assess the plebe academic experience? If so, are we assessing it the most effective way?

What other questions occur to you from reading this section of the article?

We will be discussing this in our May “Brown Bag” sessions (see page 3), but if you have any comments as you read this article in the newsletter throughout the semester, please feel free to e-mail them to Anita Gandolfo at the CTE to begin this conversation.

CTE Brown Bag Schedule for the Spring Semester

All sessions are held from noon to 1315 in Thayer Hall, Room 120 on the dates listed below (monthly sessions are repeated on two days to accommodate people's schedules). Remember to bring your lunch!

23 & 24 January

A New Taxonomy?

In the most recent issue of *Change*, the journal of the American Association for Higher Education, the President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Lee Shulman, published a provocative article proposing a new "table of learning." As the author himself admits, it's unlikely that his taxonomy is entirely "new" since "all the likely taxonomies have been invented, and in nearly infinite variety." However, this variation is a great opportunity to give some thought to the issue of how learning occurs. In this session, we will discuss Shulman's article to determine whether his ideas provide any insight into our instructional mission. You can (and should!) read the Shulman article on the Carnegie website at <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/> prior to attending this session.

27 & 28 February

The Teachers We Never Forget

In his recent essay, Dr. Robert J. Sternberg, American Psychological Association President-elect, described those teachers we never forget as "transformational mentors" who inspire their students in significant ways. This session is designed for participants to share stories of such teachers, as we try to identify some common themes in this shared experience. What are the qualities of those "teachers we never forget"?

27 & 28 March

Collaboration for Learning?

What ways of working together among faculty promote cadet learning? Last semester, two instructors "linked" plebe classes in CH101 and EN101 to try out an idea that is highly recommended, especially for freshman-level classes. In this session, the instructors will describe what their experience was as well as how the cadets reported their experience. We hope this brief report will stimulate further discussion about possible (or actual) collaborations for learning at USMA.

1 & 2 May

How Can We Improve?

Throughout the semester, we will be serializing in our newsletter an article on "What Research Says About Improving Undergraduate Education." In this session, we'll discuss ideas for specific things the research indicates would be valuable for USMA to do. We expect this session to result in a written report to be shared with the entire faculty and we hope you'll plan to participate in this process.

And don't forget about . . .

***TALENT at West Point
Saturday, 5 April***

Our conference on Teaching And Learning Effectively using New Technologies is almost fully organized, and we'll be announcing it to our colleagues at civilian colleges and universities in the next few weeks. You can see the schedule, along with abstracts of the presentations at <http://www.dean.usma.edu/cte/conference.html>

Please keep in mind that any USMA faculty member who wishes to attend morning sessions but not the entire conference is welcome to attend FREE of charge. However, for planning purposes, we want you to register. Any questions about this or any other conference issues should be directed to Anita Gandolfo at the CTE.



For the *New Semester* **Why not Try Something *New*?** (Continued from page 1)

A good site for this is at

<http://www2.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/ILSpace.html> which not only provides a survey but also provides advice about ways to study by learning style. You might have cadets compare the advice for studying according with their learning style with their typical study practices. Some other sites that can be useful for this exercise are at

<http://www.mxctc.comnet.edu/clc/survey.htm>

<http://www.metamath.com/lswb/dvclearn.htm>

From this exercise, you might ask students to identify one strategy to try this semester to study according to their style.

Create Rehearsal Opportunities

There is an undeniable performance aspect to teaching, and we tend to focus on our own performance rather than that of students, assuming that their opportunity to “perform” is on WPRs and TEEs. Why not enhance the active learning component in your course by creating opportunities for students to “rehearse” for those performances? Can you schedule mini-events that require students to demonstrate learning in a variety of ways that will help them deepen their learning of course objectives? Providing situations in which students must verbalize their understanding of course concepts not only helps them deepen their learning, but it provides an opportunity for the instructor to assess the accuracy of their understanding before the evaluation process. Such rehearsal opportunities do not have to be formal briefings. Here’s one example of a simple activity.

Keep two “fishbowls,” one of slips containing the names of individual cadets and another of slips with exam-type questions on previously taught course material (you can add to this bowl throughout the semester. Reserve five minutes at either the beginning or end of class. The section marcher blindly selects one name from the bowl of names, and that cadet then selects a slip from the question bowl and tries to answer it. The remaining members of the class then critique the response. This provides the cadets with regular review of course material, and it provides the instructor with a systematic assessment of cadet performance.

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THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

No matter how “active” the learning is, there’s always a time when an instructor has to present course material. Here are excellent pieces of advice from the experts.

Professors known as outstanding lecturers do two things; they use a simple plan and many examples.

- W. McKeachie

Thought flows in terms of stories - stories about events, stories about people, and stories about intentions and achievements. The best teachers are the best story tellers. We learn in the form of stories.

- Frank Smith