



Teaching at USMA

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Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher

In a book with the title *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*,* the educator Stephen Brookfield describes the process of reflection for teachers as occurring through “four distinct, though interconnecting, lenses”:¹ our own experiences as learners and teachers, the perspective of our students, the lens provided by our colleagues’ perceptions and experiences, and the lens of literature that we read about our area of practice. Brookfield offers a variety of occasions for reflection, but as the academic year draws to a close, it might be helpful to offer an adaptation of what he calls a “Teacher Learning Audit,” a structured way to reflect on the experiences of the past year through that first lens of autobiography.

Teacher Learning Audit (TLA)

The TLA is designed for teachers to view themselves as adult learners and by means of this reflective activity to identify the skills, knowledge, and insights they have developed in the recent past. Whether an individual has been teaching for 10 months or 10 years (or longer!), he or she should always be involved in learning—in the discipline as well as about the process of teaching and learning. What follows is one example of a TLA that might be useful to USMA faculty members as our academic year draws to a close.

Please think back over the past two semesters in your life as a teacher and complete the following sentences as honestly as you can:

The most important thing I’ve learned about my students in the past year is. . . .

The most important thing I’ve learned about my teaching in the past year is. . . .

The assumptions I had about teaching and learning that have been most confirmed for me in the past year are that. . . .

The assumptions I had about teaching and learning that have been most challenged for me in the past year are that. . . .

Compared with this time last August, I now know that. . . .

Compared with this time last August, I am now able to. . . .

After you’ve completed your responses to these open-ended statements, you can start your reflection by asking yourself the following series of questions:

Do I describe my learning primarily in cognitive or in emotional terms?

Do I write mainly about the development of personal insight or of psychomotor, instrumental accomplishments?

How much of the learning I identify focuses on things not directly related to teaching—such as the art of political survival or developing support networks?

How much of my learning is in an entirely new area, and how much is a refinement, rethinking, or adaptation of something I already know or can do?

How much of it confirms my existing practices and assumptions, and how much challenges my typical ways of thinking and teaching?

Keep in mind that this reflection comprises just one lens through which you can learn about yourself as a teacher, and also keep in mind that those other lenses (e.g., student feedback on instruction) are also partial lenses. The important point to keep in mind is that all teachers must also be learners and that critical reflection is an important way to learn about oneself as a teacher♦

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* Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (Jossey-Bass, 1995).

Blackboard: Questions and Answers

Question 1. What is Blackboard?

Answer: Blackboard, is a course management system that offers a great way to use the power of the Internet to support the teaching and learning process. Blackboard offers one stop shopping – one place for Faculty and Cadets to go to manage their course activities. Blackboard has robust capabilities in three broad areas: Content Sharing, Communications, and Evaluation.

Content Sharing: Blackboard has the capability to allow Faculty to post course materials in any format (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Video, etc.) for 24/7 Cadet access. All instructors need to do is browse for a file on their computer, and then it can be easily attached into Blackboard. Blackboard also gives Cadets the ability to post assignments and papers into a central area managed by the course instructor. These student postings are time stamped and can be easily managed in the integrated Blackboard grade book.

Communications: Blackboard has a diverse feature set to support Faculty/Cadet and Cadet/Cadet communication. Blackboard's powerful asynchronous discussion board can be used to answer Cadet questions, or as a general forum to allow Cadets to respond critically to questions posed by the instructor. Another Blackboard tool is the synchronous virtual classroom. This tool allows Faculty and Cadets to collaborate in real time using a text chat and/or shared whiteboard. Many Faculty use these tools for Extra Instruction and evening office hours. Faculty and Cadets communication is also enhanced via Blackboard's integrated email, which can be used to easily sent messages to individuals and/or all students in a course.

Evaluation: Blackboard offers the ability to produce robust assessments. Assessment types can be either exams or surveys (survey responses are recorded anonymously). Question types include, multiple choice, fill in the blank, short answer, matching, multiple answer, and essay. All questions, (except essay) are auto-graded by the computer, saving valuable instructor time and effort. Questions can also be randomized and can include feedback to increase the Cadet learning experience. Finally, Blackboard has a sophisticated tracking system which tells instructors which materials have been viewed by the Cadets and when those items were viewed.

Question 2. What are the teaching and learning benefits of Blackboard?

Answer: A powerful educational benefit of Blackboard is its ability to increase Faculty/Cadet and Cadet/Cadet communications. Studies have shown that increased interaction results in better learning. Blackboard tools such as discussion boards, chat rooms, exams, surveys, etc. provide many opportunities for this type of interaction. Another educational benefit of Blackboard is that instructors can set-up courses with content in a variety of formats, from text to video. This enables Cadets with different learning styles the opportunity to view a variety of material and therefore, maximize their learning potential. As a final example (although there are many others), Blackboard greatly reduces time spent on course "administrivia" - copying course materials, answering questions repeatedly, making course announcements, grading multiple choice quizzes, etc.

Question 3: Is Blackboard very difficult to learn?

Answer: The wonderful thing about Blackboard is that it is a very easy program to learn and to use. If you use email, can find files on your computer, and can browse the Internet, you have all the computer skills you need to use Blackboard.

Question 4. Will developing a Blackboard course take a lot of time?

Answer: Because Blackboard has so many great features, the amount of time you invest in developing a course in Blackboard is entirely up to you. You may choose to use only a limited number of features in Blackboard, in which case the development time will be minimal. Adding a lot of content or using many features may take more time. However, many Faculty who use Blackboard feel that the investment of time is worth it because Blackboard saves them significant time overall. For example you can very easily place existing content, like syllabi, lecture notes, assignments, etc. in any format (Word, Excel, PowerPoint) in Blackboard for 24/7 Cadet access. This saves you significant time copying materials and makes it easy to continually update documents at your discretion. Other Blackboard features such as the on-line assessment tools can provide significant time savings by auto-grading quizzes and exams.

Question 5. Now that Blackboard is being adapted by USMA, am I required to use it in my course?

Answer: Blackboard is priority initiative at USMA and a major investment for the Academy. Because of its many benefits, USMA Faculty are strongly encouraged to learn more about Blackboard and become more familiar with its potential as a teaching and learning tool. That said, as with any instructional tool, it is up course instructors to decide if or how they will use Blackboard in their course.

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Caveat Laptop

from Anita Gandolfo

Last year, we published a pseudonymous essay with this title. That article, which focuses on some potential pitfalls of the computer in the classroom, is available on the CTE website in our "Teaching with Technology" section. My own modest addendum to that essay comes from my experience teaching EN101 last fall.

I have been teaching EN101 on computers for the past seven years at USMA (and prior to that I taught composition in a computer lab in a civilian school for several years), and from these experiences I have always been an advocate of teaching composition through word processing. I assessed the effect of writing with the computer in a recent article.* However, I taught these earlier classes, both with desktops and laptops, on computers that were not owned by the students—nor did they have e-mail capability. Last semester, however, I taught my plebes on their own computers, and the experience was quite different.

I have always graded electronically, but when I taught previously, the cadets did not submit their writing via e-mail as we did last semester, since Outlook (and earlier Exchange) was not on the machines. Instead we used disks (and later a shared drive). Cadet engagement in the writing process was very notable. As I wrote in my article,

One of my first observations was that students want feedback. At West Point, a class does not officially begin until its scheduled time, and students who arrive a few minutes early usually chat informally. Time is so structured that they generally relish these precious minutes for social interaction. However, in this class, as they arrived the cadets immediately retrieved their disks without any prompting from me, read my comments and began their revisions. By the time class began, most students had completed their revisions.

Two things changed with the introduction of the cadet-owned laptops. The first was that I e-mailed my corrections to the cadets to give feedback as quickly as possible. For example, we write a daily brief paragraph, and with this C hour class, I usually returned their corrected paragraphs by noon. Prompt feedback is supposed to be better for learning, and these cadets didn't have to wait until the next class meeting to see my comments. However, since I require them to make the corrections and return the paragraph, it was clear to me that their "attention to detail" was significantly less in the barracks environment than when working in class. The more "prompt" feedback was definitely not an advantage.

Nor were the cadets as focused in class as I'd previously noted. When they came in and booted up their computers, they didn't go to the class website to review or to the document we were currently working on (in the workshop environment I try to create, there is almost always some "work in progress"). No, they immediately checked their e-mail and/or engaged in other personal computing until the class "officially" began.

While I certainly could not complain about the cadets using their own time for e-mail, I often had to specifically address the issue after class began to get them into the day's assigned work.

More disturbing however, was an incident that occurred later in the semester. The class was working on a fairly complex assignment, and all of them seemed dutifully engaged as I circulated around the room as they wrote. As the class ended, I instructed the cadets to e-mail me their work, a departure from my usual practice of waiting until the assignment was completed before looking at it. Due to the complexity of this particular writing task, I wanted to determine whether they needed more direction in our next session and, if so, what I would need to address. One of the better writers in the class came up to me before he departed and said,

"I'll have to send you that later tonight because I wasn't working on the assignment during class."

I was shocked and asked him what he had been doing, and he responded,

"I was working on my math project because it's due today."

The cadet wasn't the least bit embarrassed by this admission; he seemed to believe that he'd made a good choice in how to best use his time.

What bothered me most about this incident is that this cadet, knowing what we'd be doing in class, obviously planned the night before to use English class time to work on the math project—otherwise he would have completed the project before the class day. In other words, he saw our hour as one he could decide to use in any way he wished. This was clear to me when I admonished him for not doing what had been assigned in class. He seemed puzzled by my consternation and responded,

"But I can do that later, so what difference does it make?"

This incident reminded me of a comment last semester during a discussion of the impending arrival of the laptops. One faculty member enthusiastically welcomed the advent of portable computing because, he said, it would enable the cadet to bring the classroom back to the barracks (which, by the way, I always thought was possible through the non-technical use of a notebook).

However, we should perhaps be mindful of the fact that from the cadet perspective, the laptop may be the opportunity to bring the barracks into the classroom. That is, the laptop is not just another tool for class, it contains a great deal of both academic and personal material as well as a portal to the outside world. This may cause the development of a sense that they can "opt" to do other things during class. Such behavior by students has been documented in the national press, so we shouldn't be surprised to see it among our cadets♦

*"Writing with Computers: The Methodology is the Message," *Journal for the Art of Teaching*. Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 2001), 71-80.

Response to last month's quotation on teaching

Last month we offered this quotation on teaching

“The task of the excellent teacher is to stimulate ‘apparently ordinary’ people to unusual effort. The tough problem is not in identifying winners: it is in making winners out of ordinary people.”

—K. Patricia Cross

And we asked:

Do you agree or disagree with Professor Cross?

We only heard from one faculty member, Dr. Eileen Kowalski, of D/Chem & LS, who responded:

Stimulating ordinary people to unusual effort is not the task of excellent teachers. It is the task of *all* teachers. Excellent teachers are the ones who do it well. USMA version: leaders have the same task.

Blackboard: Questions and Answers

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Question 6: Will Blackboard replace the instructional methods I have employed so successfully over the years?

Answer: Faculty who have used Blackboard have found that using the Blackboard toolset can offer significant educational benefits as well as time savings for both Faculty and Cadets. Because every course and instructional circumstance is unique, some Blackboard features may work well to support existing instructional methods, while other features may not be appropriate. As the course instructor, it is up to you to decide to what extent you would like to use Blackboard. Exploration and experimentation with Blackboard is strongly encouraged. Staff at the Center for Teaching Excellence are available to assist you as you consider how you might use Blackboard in your course.

Question 7: How can I learn more about Blackboard?

The Center for Teaching Excellence is offering a series of workshop about Blackboard. Workshop details and registration information can be found at: <http://www-internal.dean.usma.edu/centers/cte/blackboard.htm>

If you have other questions about Blackboard and how it can help support teaching and learning in your course, contact Jeffrey Rohrlack, Instructional Technologist: email: Jeffrey.rohrlick@usma.edu; phone: (x4257).

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