

# Teaching at USMA

Vol. 10 No. 4

Center for Teaching Excellence  
<http://www-internal.dean.usma.edu/centers/cte>

November 2004

## Assigning and Assessing Writing in the Disciplines

In a recent article, Peter Elbow points out that academics tend to prioritize reading over writing when learning is more apt to occur with the latter. He attributes the confusion to a basic misconception of what learning actually entails. That is, most people think of learning as input—listening and reading, not talking and writing. Even when writing is assigned, it often serves reading. That is, the student is writing in response to readings, whether summarizing or analyzing.

As Elbow explains, learning is less a matter of input than the making of meaning. The reader who is a learner is extracting information from a text and integrating that information into patterns of meaning for him or her self. The traditional “paper” assignment was an opportunity for the student to demonstrate learning in a course. It functioned as both a model of the student’s learning and a method for deepening learning through the exploration and/or research implicit in the assignment.

Thus, a course “paper” is not an insignificant event. It should not be viewed by either the instructor or the students as simply one more requirement to be met in a course. Since writing is a process of slowly constructing meaning, ideally in relation to feedback from peers, a course writing assignment should be structured to promote that process. That is, if the average undergraduate is given an assignment along with the deadline for final submission, there will be little opportunity for the “slow construction of meaning” that is learning.

### Implications for Teaching

If the paper should encourage the construction of knowledge by the student, the assignment should be neither too prescriptive nor too open-ended. It should have a specific learning objective—that is, it should require the student to engage in a cognitive process suitable to the level of the student within the discipline.

*(Continued on page 3)*

## The Course-End Feedback System and YOU!

Many USMA instructors fail to realize that our Course-End Feedback system was originally designed to provide information for individual classroom instructors. As the educator Steven Brookfield has pointed out, “*The most important knowledge teachers need to do good work is a knowledge of how students are experiencing learning and perceiving their teacher’s actions.*”

That’s why we have always referred to the process as “feedback.” This is not a student *evaluation* of instruction. Rather, it’s an attempt to get at the students’ experience of instruction. The educator Peter Ewell refers to the “three curricula” of every institution, the course: 1) as described in the catalog [or Redbook]; 2) as taught by the instructor; and 3) as experienced by the student. And he asserts that the major effort of every educational institution is to bring those three curricular as close together as possible. Instructors who elicit the student experience of instruction can ascertain how closely cadet perceptions correlate with their own conception of what happened in the course.

Thus, although our system enables questions at a variety of levels, from the Academy (Dean) through the Department, Program, and Course, the most significant questions are those written by the individual instructors. Yes, each of you can (and should) ask specific questions of your cadets.

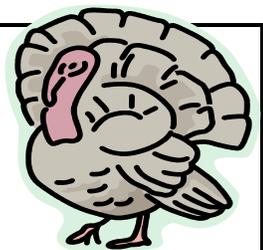
It’s important to keep in mind that cadets are filling out a form for every course they are taking, so the surveys for each individual course should be kept as short as possible to garner the most reliable information.

*(Continued on page 2)*

### Also in this issue:

Page 2—**TALENT** note

Page 4—**Upcoming at the CTE**



## The Course-End Feedback System and YOU!

(Continued from page 1)

Here is how one instructor elicited cadet feedback on his teaching:

*Please provide me with any advice you have for improving my instruction. . . remember, this information comes only to me.”  
Thanks, CPT. . . .*

Note that this is a free text response, and the instructor need pose only one question to get valuable information from cadets.

Here are the questions of another instructor who posed two:

*What did you like most about the course? (i.e. what should I avoid changing?)*

*What did you like least about the course? (i.e., what should I consider changing next year?)*

Another single question that can provide good information for an instructor is

*What suggestion(s) do you have for me for the next time I teach this course?*

Keep in mind that our system does not permit anyone else to view responses to your questions. They are confidential to you and are intended solely for your personal development. If, after you've received cadet responses, you would like help interpreting them, the CTE would be happy to assist.

The survey is open for your input of questions this semester until **COB 2 December**. If you are not sure how to input questions, contact your department's "trusted agent." The "trusted agent" manages the system for individual departments and provides appropriate access for individuals. If you don't know your trusted agent, see the listing in the next column♦

## Department Trusted Agents for the USMA Course-End Feedback System

BS&L	Professor Carroll
C&LS	LTC Hoff
CME	Ms. Tesoriero
DFL	Ms. Dubaldi; MAJ Steffen
DMI	Mr. Barnett; MAJ Harvey
EECS	Ms. Robinson
ENG	Ms. Hart; Ms. Fox; MAJ Chancellor; CPT Saxon
G&EnE	Ms. Keller
History	Prof. Bucher
Law	LTC Bickers
Math	LTC Wilmer
Physics	Ms. Wojehowski
SE	MAJ Lenz
SOCSOI	MAJ Lira

Note that the CEP and DPE are on a different cycle than other programs, and instructors should check with the following individuals about deadlines:

CEP	Ms. Nadeau-Schaff
DPE	Dr. Wood

### TALENT Note:

At our session on 10 December, MAJ Bart Stewart of D/Math showed some interactive exercises he created in Excel, the type of thing usually done with Java but impossible for those of us unable to program. He has also included some instructions on his website for those who might want to create activities for their own classes. You can check out MAJ Stewart's exceptional work at

[http://www.dean.usma.edu/departments/math/people/stewart/interactive\\_tools.htm](http://www.dean.usma.edu/departments/math/people/stewart/interactive_tools.htm)



## SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR GOOD PRACTICE IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

By Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson  
Reprinted with permission.

Apathetic students, illiterate graduates, incompetent teaching, impersonal campuses -- so rolls the drumfire of criticism of higher education. More than two years of reports have spelled out the problems. States have been quick to respond by holding out carrots and beating with sticks.

There are neither enough carrots nor enough sticks to improve undergraduate education without the commitment and action of students and faculty members. They are the precious resources on whom the improvement of undergraduate education depends.

But how can students and faculty members improve undergraduate education? Many campuses around the country are asking this question. To provide a focus for their work, we offer seven principles based on research on good teaching and learning in colleges and universities.

Good practice in undergraduate education:

- 1. encourages contact between students and faculty,**
- 2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,**
- 3. encourages active learning,**
- 4. gives prompt feedback,**
- 5. emphasizes time on task,**
- 6. communicates high expectations, and**
- 7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning.**

We can do it ourselves - with a little bit of help...

These seven principles are not ten commandments shrunk to a 20th century attention span. They are intended as guidelines for faculty members, students, and administrators -- with support from state agencies and trustees -- to improve teaching and learning. These principles seem like good common sense, and they are -- because many teachers and students have experienced them and because research supports them. They rest on 50 years of research on the way teachers teach and students learn, how students work and play with one another, and how students and faculty talk to each other.

While each practice can stand alone on its own, when all are present their effects multiply. Together they employ six powerful forces in education:

- activity,
- expectations,
- cooperation,
- interaction,
- diversity, and
- responsibility.

Good practices hold as much meaning for professional programs as for the liberal arts. They work for many different kinds of students -- white, black, Hispanic, Asian, rich, poor, older, younger, male, female, well-prepared, underprepared.

But the ways different institutions implement good practice depend very much on their students and their circumstances. In what follows, we describe several different approaches to good practice that have been used in different kinds of settings in the last few years. In addition, the powerful implications of these principles for the way states fund and govern higher education and for the way institutions are run are discussed briefly at the end.

As faculty members, academic administrators, and student personnel staff, we have spent most of our working lives trying to understand our students, our colleagues, our institutions and ourselves. We have conducted research on higher education with dedicated colleagues in a wide range of schools in this country. With the implications of this research for practice, we hope to help us all do better.

We address the teacher's *how*, not the subject-matter *what*, of good practice in undergraduate education. We recognize that content and pedagogy interact in complex ways. We are also aware that there is much healthy ferment within and among the disciplines. What is taught, after all, is at least as important as how it is taught. In contrast to the long history of research in teaching and learning, there is little research on the college curriculum. We cannot, therefore, make responsible recommendations about the content of good undergraduate education. That work is yet to be done. This much we can say: An undergraduate education should prepare students to understand and deal intelligently with modern life. What better place to start but in the classroom and on our campuses? What better time than now?

119 Thayer Hall

**Director**

Dr. Anita Gandolfo  
x6155

**Asst. Director**

Dr. David Trubatch  
x4257

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Mr. Jeffrey Rohrlick  
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**Call for Presentation Proposals  
USMA TALENT Conference**

Theme: ***Student Learning in the Information Age***

**Saturday, 9 April 2005**  
Mark your calendar now!

Full information and proposal format is available on the CTE website. Proposals should be submitted via e-mail to [Anita.Gandolfo@usma.edu](mailto:Anita.Gandolfo@usma.edu) **no later than Monday, 10 January 2005.**