

Teaching and Learning Newsletter

Spring Issue

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Calibrating “Good Teaching” and Lancing Acceptance of the Axiomatic— Continued from the Winter Issue, 2006

Questions about the immutability, variability, and complexity of human proclivities to compete, exploit, cooperate, and sacrifice guide study of political theories of liberatory collectivism in PS 377. Advocacies for this or that form of political economy likewise can be traced to animating premises about the human and social condition. These perspectives help clarify the mass appeal, or lack thereof, of various political and economic arrangements encountered in the class. They also shed light on the nature of scholarly evaluations of them—evaluating the evaluators.

Introduction to China presents a special challenge for this type of pedagogy. Adequately surveying four thousand years of recorded history in less than fifteen weeks is itself a virtual impossibility, as I repeatedly remind students in what amounts to a running apology. When subject matter permits, however, students are led to inquire after the origins and veracity of their own assumptions about China and its people. The point is not to refute East versus West comparisons. Rather, it is to understand how many such claims are but caricatures that cloud perception of otherwise illu-

minating cross-cultural parallels. In considering attitudes toward language, for instance, we learn of the widely held and rather presumptuous Chinese belief that their language is too unique and difficult for foreigners to acquire, but also how flesh and blood exceptions are commonly praised and encouraged. This oddly compares to the widely held and rather presumptuous American expectation that all humans should speak fluent, unaccented English, which can trigger contemptuous reactions to flesh and blood exceptions. In this way students may learn to discern superficial depictions of cultural difference while more deeply appreciating commonalities.

Exposing and analyzing assumptions also involves attending to the rhetorical uses of language—the politicization of meaning calculated to obfuscate or misrepresent what is otherwise damaging. Through short-essay assignments, critical newspaper readings, lecture and discussion, students are trained to question language and recognize its use in the exercise of political and commercial power. Whether it be the now familiar term “collateral damage,” invoked to preempt moral scrutiny of military conduct; or “moderate Arab governments,” which attaches to fa-



By 2005 Excellence in Teaching Award winner, Alan Epstein

vored regimes deemed by others egregious violators of human rights; or the concept “free trade,” denoting the barrier-free international exchange favored by developed economies whose massive subsidies and protections for preferred sectors and enterprises are condemned as hypocritical by representatives of less consequential economies; or the related “free trade agreements,” which are less about regularizing commercial flows than promoting cross-border investment and—though less pleasant sounding—foreign ownership and control, students are instructed how to probe the realities behind labels. They also learn to appreciate how meaning can be utilized as a tool of persuasion in the quest to realize unpopular interests.

A companion core to my teaching is enabling students to contextualize studied subject matter. Apprehending historical antecedents clarifies

problems conventionally regarded as timeless and thus insoluble; now understood as having a genesis and possible solution. Situating, for example, the seemingly permanent conflicts and poverty in much of Africa, and the equally dismal violence among Palestinians and Israelis, in the context of various colonial and post-colonial impositions illuminates marginalized traumas, and deepens understanding of actual complexities and the genuine requirements for amelioration.

Establishing trust in the classroom is also essential.

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Teaching and Learning
Committee

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Teaching and Learning Newsletter

Calibrating Good Teaching...

As many students have emotional and intellectual investments in the assumptions and conventions we critically examine, a given course can prove unsettling. It is crucial that class members perceive my conduct as balanced and that opposing views are treated respectfully, not dismissively. By refraining from discourse that personalizes characterizations and insisting that such protocol be followed by everyone in attendance, it is hoped students come to view our classroom as a sanctuary for free inquiry. Consistently treating with seriousness even the most off-base remarks, and requiring that all comments be held to the same level of scrutiny and evidence, a comfort level maximizing enriching interaction is formed.

Given the previously remarked contestability of course subject matter, it is important to be aware of how desire for superior evaluation motivates not only laudable achievement, but can also pressure for conformist thinking—the opposite of my design and proof of failure. To combat this, I must further establish a reputation for fairness. Plainly explaining the reasons for my assessments of student work, and presenting anonymous examples of highly regarded assignments, papers and examinations at odds with positions I have endorsed but hewing to the publicized standards of evi-

dence and logic that are invariant for each course member helps promote this regard. While providing detailed study guides for lower division courses establishing scope for graded tasks, students are also advised that mere regurgitation is not the formula for high achievement. Original elaborations and critiques are. Devising tasks that shelter a variety of acceptable responses, or where only theoretical ones are possible, encourages this sort of performance.

Teaching is my passion. I am invigorated by the material I am privileged to present for student scrutiny, and by their multiple and sometimes surprising reactions to it. When students creatively process subject matter and proffer reasoned interpretations of it, they become generators of knowledge and their teacher among the beneficiaries. Their insights, questions and challenges have furthered my own awareness and, thereby, that of succeeding contingents of pupils. I have long been sustained by the comments of students remarking how a particular course or aspect of one positively changed and inspired them. This feedback reminds one of the possibilities of teaching.

It also suggests its limits. Such positive evidence of teaching is exceptional. As the cultivation of independent thinking may not bear fruit during a given semester of study, but at best lay dormant

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awaiting a triggering experience that stimulates reconsideration of something encountered in a course, I cannot be certain in any timely way of consistently (or ever) engaging in “good teaching”. Papers, examinations, class discussions, and conferencing are but rough estimates of development at specific and brief intervals of time. At the risk of seeming callous, it is fundamentally the responsibility of students to wrestle intellectually and emotionally with class material. The grade received need not be everlastingly indicative of what I aspire to stimulate. It is not a tidy nor reassuring circumstance. Neither, oftentimes, is the subject matter I teach.

**Spring,
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Automated Student Response Systems

Spring Issue

By Professor of Chemistry
Dr. Dagmar Cronn

A new classroom technology is becoming increasingly popular with students and faculty, the so-called personal or student response systems. The latest versions of the software/hardware systems have become easy to learn to use and have extended the flexibility with greater numbers of features.

Each student is assigned a transmitter that operates on the same concept as a TV remote. A receiver/detector logs the signals from each student's transmitter as they answer a question posed on the projector screen. Software allows instant graphing of the anonymous responses of the students.

There are numerous pedagogical reasons to adopt a student response system in a classroom. Several of the advantages stem from the fact that students enjoy using the system so much. Because they like using the system, they are more likely to attend class regularly. Because they expect questions to be posed on the course material being covered, they pay attention better during class. The fun the students have using the system makes for better learning. These

benefits accrue regardless whether the course is one for majors or non-majors. For students taking a course outside of their major, these systems are especially useful in helping students become more intrigued with the course content.

We have been using one of the systems since about 2001 with the inception of the SCI 100, Physical Science – Life, the World and Beyond course. We have benefited from the increase in features that all systems have provided in the interim years. A typical response to the question "What did you like best about the module just completed?" is the clickers (i.e., the use of the transmitters).

There are additional benefits to using these systems beyond the popularity with students. 1) They improve communication in the class. Because the use of the clickers is anonymous, those students who are quiet and/or shy participate. So the instructor receives feedback and opinions from all students, not just the few most vocal. Questions can be posed that require thought and all students are required to think through to an answer in order to respond. 2) They provide instant feedback to students about their level of understanding and how they stack up against other students. But, an individual's information is available only to the individual and it can come each class period rather than episodically with quizzes and mid-term exams. This spurs students to keep up

with course content. 3) SRS systems provide real-time feedback to the teacher. Misconceptions can be identified and corrected immediately. You can determine if most students understand a difficult concept. Posing provocative questions can initiate class more lively class discussions.

You can assign grades to the answers. I personally like this because so many students are apprehensive about science classes and are so anxious during formal quizzes and exams that they are unable to demonstrate what they know. Students are more relaxed for one or two graded questions that appear scattered throughout each class period.

So what do you need to get started using a student response system? Generally you need: 1) Student clickers (transmitters), 2) Detector/receiver (usually with separate power supply), 3) Computer, 4) Connecting cable, and 5) Software.

Many of the companies provide the software for free and charge for the hardware. OU does not provide hardware in classrooms at this time. However, you may ask Classroom Support to download the software to a classroom computer via the normal service request form. It takes no more time to set up in the classroom than for any other classroom use of computers.

Items 2, 3 and 4 must be purchased for use by the in-

structor in the classroom. Clickers can either be provided for the students or the students can be required to purchase them themselves. They can be made available through bookstores. Or, many textbook publishers now incorporate the cost of the clicker as part of the supplemental materials accompanying a textbook. Selected textbooks are already providing SRS questions tied to the textbook material the same way they provide test bank questions.

Some of the purveyors of

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"Several of the advantages stem from the fact that students enjoy using the system so much."

these systems include GCTO's Interwrite PRS, TurningPoint, eInstruction and i-Clicker. The first three operate on infrared technology and the last one on radio frequency. The manufacturers or textbook publishers will provide tutorials and workshops on request as long as you have purchased the hardware or are using the textbook in your class. There will be a workshop session available through e-Learning and Instructional Support starting next fall semester. E-LIS will also have web information on their site at: <http://www2.oakland.edu/elis/>.

The software packages operate in conjunction with or within other programs. A PowerPoint slide can become a question integrated among other slides. The individual clicker identification is

matched to the student assigned to that clicker. So, results can be moved into a grade sheet automatically. Results can be printed in different formats or moved into Excel, or the grade sheets of systems like WebCT. Creating the roster that matches clickers to students can be created by the instructor or via a couple of approaches to registration - one online or during a registration classroom session at the beginning of a term.

Finally, what single main reason is there for using a student response system? It is fun for the instructor, too! The satisfaction of using a solution to some of the long-standing problems in creating the best possible learning environment makes go-

ing through the learning curve to use a new classroom technology worth it.

Teaching and Learning
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THE WEB CONNECTION

Check out the following websites for helpful information and connections to teaching and learning!

EDUCAUSE

A nonprofit association whose mission is to advance higher education by promoting the intelligent use of information technology. <http://www.educause.edu/>

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education is a national voluntary organization of colleges and universities that prepare the nation's teachers and other educational personnel. Located in Washington, D.C., AACTE is the leader for innovation in teacher education. <http://www.aacte.org/>

International Alliance of Teacher Scholars and Lilly Conferences

We invite you to join colleagues from all disciplines and types of colleges and universities in discussions and presentations about what works in your classroom. <http://www.iats.com>

This is an article on detecting and preventing plagiarism. It has several good links to prevention tools. <http://www.newfoundations.com/PREVPLAGWEB/PlagiarismWeb.html>

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
(<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org>)

Center for Research on Teaching and Learning (U. of M.)
<http://www.crit.umich.edu/>