Submissions

The Faculty Focus is a publication for all instructors at the University of Central Florida. This includes full- and part-time faculty at all UCF campuses. Its purpose is to provide an exchange of ideas on teaching and learning for the university’s community of teachers and scholars. This represents an opportunity for faculty to reach their peers throughout the growing UCF community.

The Faculty Focus invites you to contribute your ideas on teaching and learning in a short essay.

See the guidelines for submission online at <http://www.fctl.ucf.edu/publications/focus/guidelines.htm>. Publication dates will be the middle of the first and last full months of each semester, and submission deadlines will be the Friday of the week prior. MLA format is preferred. Please send your submissions to Faculty Focus, fctl@mail.ucf.edu.

Faculty Focus

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Teaching Legacy: Voices of Experience

Richard Tucker

Dick Tucker is a Professor of Psychology. He joined UCF in 1972 from Emory University where he completed his Ph.D. He serves as Director of the UCF Initiative on Aging and Longevity. His general interests are in Developmental Psychology, particularly as related to aging issues, and his specific interests include the characteristics of older Canadians in Florida with focus on health care needs and utilization, the effects of lifelong learning on memory self-efficacy, and general issues in successful aging.

With this issue we start a new feature in which we will ask a different senior faculty member at UCF five questions related to their teaching experiences at UCF.

1. What teaching methods have you found to be most effective for your students? Teaching is an interaction between me and the students. I use a very interactive style and don’t lecture from a script. I rely on the textbook to give students the kind of information that they’ll need for the test; what I present in the classroom is a supplement and a conceptual framework. I try to challenge students by asking them questions, and based on their responses, they help to frame what we cover in the class.

2. What was your most memorable teaching experience? There isn’t one memorable experience; there are multiple that stick out. What they all have in common is seeing a light go on. Students just finally understand something; they just see it differently. In their writings, as they talk about their experiences, I’ve had students who had a mind-transforming experience in thinking about the material.

3. What single piece of advice would you give to new instructors today? Remember that teaching very much involves communication and learning how best to communicate to students. Also, they have to think about what made them excited about the subject matter and what their passion is now. Don’t be afraid to share that with the students. I want the students to know my passion for the subject matter; I think it makes a difference to know that you care about what you’re teaching and that this isn’t just an assignment.

4. Why did you become a university professor? What kept you in the profession? I actually started out thinking I was going into the ministry. I think that notion of “calling” has remained with me. I find in teaching this sense of making a difference, affecting lives, and providing guidance. Things that are very ministerial in a way. That’s what’s kept me going. If you don’t feel you can’t make a difference—I don’t care what you’re doing—then you really stagnate. Higher education is a great place because you can always find that feeling. And if you don’t feel it, then it’s time to get out.

5. What changes have you seen over your career with regard to student learning and how have you adapted to them? The big change is students’ instant access to information, which changes things. I do a lot with email, and I find the immediacy of it makes a difference with students. Using technology to enhance teaching, not to replace it, has been one of the big changes—and most of that has been positive. However, I am concerned about increases in class size and those particular challenges. This is an area where the Faculty Center has been helpful, to try to convince people to see how they can still be effective teachers within the large classroom setting. We can do more than just lecture and give multiple-choice tests.

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Karen L. Smith Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning
Creatively Using Classroom Response Systems for GEP

Thomas J. Brueckner

A few days ago, one of my faculty mates caught me in the hallway and told me that he had observed one of my lectures to a large lecture hall of GEP students. He was quite pleased to see the engagement of the students with the lecture. He specifically mentioned engagement through our use of the “clickers” of our classroom response systems. He has also taught large sections of 300 students and knows how difficult it can be to reach and stay in the state of engagement with so many students at once. I was surprised and delighted to hear my colleague’s words.

In truth, when I came to UCF in 2002, “student engagement” was a new vocabulary word for me, a nerdy physics type. But it is an idea that has the mark. Are students thinking with me, as I lecture? Is the student’s mind engaged and ready to roll, or is it stuck in “NEU-TRAL” and on the verge of being asleep at the wheel? One fairly solid engagement tool is the “clicker” system for higher education.

Classroom response systems are composed of several pieces of equipment: a set of handheld clickers that transmit a student’s response to a question; a base unit that receives the signals and processes them; a laptop or desktop computer with a program that displays the questions on a computer projection system and records the decisions of the students. The clickers are like remote control units for a television, small enough to place in a student’s book bag. The receiver is connected to the lecturer’s laptop or the lecture hall’s desktop. It took me less than 20 minutes to download the software, connect the USB receiver, and started using the clickers just as my students do now in lecture. It was a snap.

With my first PowerPoint slide running in the background, I usually run the attendance function first, in which students electronically sign in; it takes four button pushes to “join” the session. Then they “vote” any letter A through H to signify attendance. I close the attendance function after a minute or so, and I engage the lesson, which can have as many questions as one needs. I usually have 3-5 questions, and I run them at one or two points in the lecture. Students who arrive late can still join the CPS session between questions. The lesson is engaged and ready to use, but one can “hide” it as a narrow menu bar that floats over the PowerPoint show. I usually move the bar to the bottom of the screen, and park it there, out of the way until I want it. Clicking on the PowerPoint slide moves it along as usual. Clicking on the floating CPS menu bar will call up the next CPS question smoothly. Clicking back and forth between PowerPoint and CPS is flawless.

If a student’s clicker is not communicating with the receiver up front, it flashes a red light. If communicating and ready, it flashes green. In the middle of the session, I usually ask for a show of hands. “Anybody have a red light?” There are hardly ever any hands raised, even in a large class of a 150. Anyone who has a red light temporarily will get the green light as soon as the next question comes up. This shows that in-class reliability of the CPSrf is very high.

CPS records straight attendance data separately from the question/answer data. Before and after a session, CPSrf communicates smoothly through the Internet with the eInstruction website, from which it updates rosters in my PowerPoint, in which it stores attendance data and question scores for my use and for the use of the students. Students can log in to that website and look at their CPS lesson with answers, graded question by question. Even if they were absent, they can still view the day’s questions from home. This website interface also works reliably every time.

My principal praise for the CPSrf is this reliability, which rates far above any other system I have tried. Therefore, I can use it as a tool, knowing it will work predictably, the same each and every time, 24/7, like the proverbial Timex that keeps on ticking. And because it is a reliable tool, I can begin to use it creatively.

That is, when one has learned the nuts and bolts of assembling a lesson, the instructor can concentrate on creative questioning strategy. This is where teaching insight enters the equation. One can use simple recall questions to start class, as a review of a reading assignment; What is Newton’s third law?
In effect, through interactions with their students, mentors try to model the very kind of learning they hope their students will continue to pursue. That is, in a quite powerful and palpable way, the ideal of lifelong learning, usually reserved for students, equals the faculty mentor. We are always in the process of creating new studies with students, tinkering with old plans, searching for and coordinating effective resources, immersing ourselves in a new question, following the lead of an issue that a student has begun to articulate, making connections with colleagues who may offer a suggestive direction. We are, above all, listening, guiding, trying out new learning strategies, and staying alert to what may become yet another opening.

Perhaps like all more democratic experiences, the experience of faculty as mentor is a rather precarious one. Traditional faculty authority has been based on bodies of knowledge and academic structures that reinforce them. To enter a world of mentoring is to practice with the expectation that through serious and honest discourse and negotiation (and a community of scholars who can stretch and encourage), plans for individual studies and curricula can be built that are academically rich and that flow from the lives of our students as parents, workers, scholars, members of government and citizens. To gain experience, a faculty role that emphasizes not separation but connection, dialog, and a reweaving of relationships of authority is, in itself, a new kind of privilege.

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In the last few years, the word mentoring has taken on a rather hierarchical cast. In such contexts (many of them corporate), faculty have found themselves taking on more advisory roles, serving as guides and consultants, and helping their students negotiate their way through formerly alien academic terrain.

But the most powerful shift occurs when the interrelated movement from providing better institutional access to learning and counseling does touch the very core of the conventional faculty role. And it is here that the potential of a new faculty role that emphasizes not separation but connection, dialog, and a reweaving of relationships of authority is, in itself, a new kind of privilege. In fact, it is about the deliberate creation of opportunities for common learning. It also is motivated by the desire to respond to the needs of students, particularly through traditionally unused delivery systems that had not existed before.

Most of these institutional changes have been at the edges of faculty experience. They have not usually touched the more protected arena of faculty privilege. Particularly with the inclusion of a greater number of working adult students; however, faculty have been called upon to expand the range and nature of their interactions with students. On a simple level, it has not been unusual for faculty to have increased the hours they are available to students outside of the classroom. More significantly, because of the pressures, dilemmas, and academic strengths and weaknesses that these so-called nontraditional students have brought to our academic worlds, faculty have found themselves taking on more advisory roles, serving as guides and consultants, and helping their students negotiate their way through formerly alien academic terrain to gain the kinds of skills and competencies that we know they need. The inclusion of such a dimension into the very fabric of many of our lives as academic instructors has also had an important shift in the nature of communication between faculty and student. We have learned to listen with new attentiveness and care, knowing that our ability to understand and respond is directly related to our students’ success as learners.

If you are curious about the “clicker” technology, where students use individual wireless keypads to answer questions posed in lecture classes, you may want to visit our new website dedicated to these Classroom Response Systems.

We have comparisons and details on four of the major systems available today, including Clicker (CPS), OptionPower, Quizzdom, and Turning Point.

Classroom Response Systems can improve students’ learning by engaging them actively in the learning process. Instructors can employ the systems to gather individual student responses, to gather class-wide data on student understanding, and to provide formative feedback. It is possible to use the technology to give quizzes and tests, to take attendance, and to quantify class participation. Some of the systems provide game formats that encourage debate and team competition.

These and other resources can be found at the website: <http://www.fctl.ucf.edu/crs>.

Observing the Agony of Divorce (It’s Also a Good Teaching Tool) Bruce W. Flower

Bruce Flower is an instructor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Legal Studies. He has been on the Legal Studies faculty since 1999 and also serves on the Orange County traffic bench. He practiced law for over 34 years before retiring from practice.

Experiential learning has been an important component of most of my Legal Studies courses. My experiences address one aspect of the learning process that has broad application. My colleagues who are able to introduce students to an experiential engagement may find these suggestions useful.

Very unscientific surveys suggest up to 85% of Legal Studies students aim at legal or law-related careers. Given that statistic, I decided to integrate theory and practice in several of my courses, even though barely in my UCF teaching career. Even more strongly advised by other faculty not to require off-campus academic engagements of students, as they would turn on me. Well, as a lawyer with reasonably tough skin, I decided to include such a course. The observation assignment is in my Domestic Relations Law class. The results have been at once surprising, predictable, and extraordinarily successful, with most students reporting the off-campus experience as the one exercise that not only tied the course together, but also gave the students new and deeper insights into themselves, their communities, and the integration of practicing law within judicial and real life contexts.

Specifically, students are required to spend not less than 3 1/2 hours in observing actual court or court–related functions. The teaching strategy is to provide the students first with several weeks of legal theory, how theory is put into practice, statutory provisions, and trends in domestic relations law. Every effort is made to give students a realistic, but not complete, overview of what they will observe. The observation of different domestic relations procedures will result in a variety of student reactions, keeping in mind there are no “winners” in a divorce case. In fact, recent preliminary literature suggests the surfacing of a myriad of physical problems and other health issues, sometimes decades after and directly related to the emotional trauma of a divorce.

There are indications life expectancy actually decreases after a divorce.

Suggested student observations include:

a) Uncontested final hearings (one hour max); the old max—“you’ve seen one, you’ve seen a thousand” applies.

b) Domestic violence injunction returns (one hour max).

These surprisingly also tend to the routine and boring. Of-
The time was how many different ways you can say the same thing, give the same instructions, or tell the same story. In fact, I was learning in this class that you can sometimes use the right words, but if framed in the wrong way, your message may not get heard.

In a way, learning to write technical documents is kind of like translating information into different languages. First, my group had to learn a language that enabled us to communicate quickly and efficiently with each other, while working out our differences in a constructive manner along the way. Then we had to translate information we understood as a group into a form that was appropriate for our agency contact person. One of our assignments from our professor was to set rules and guidelines for our communication style as a group because, as I’m sure you all know, it is unlikely you will ever find yourself in a group of five people who have the same writing style. Finally, we had to figure out the best way to translate our message into a form that our intended audience would understand, because if we couldn’t connect to them, all of our hard work would be for nothing.

So how do you go about creating materials for people in a variety of workplace environments about a subject that some people know little to nothing about? Our group decided to start by asking them what they already knew, in this case what they knew about HIV/AIDS concerns and issues that may come up at work. We created an informal survey and gave it to people in the workplace. The survey was used to help us understand our audience in terms of the kind of information people already knew, and what they didn’t know about, and used this as a guideline of what we should present to our intended audience. Even the location of information within the brochure, and the form it would be presented in, down to color and font size was planned out based on how we felt our audience would respond to these seemingly insignificant details.

Attention to detail is another lesson that I am taking away from this course that I never really understood until I had to create something that was going to be used by “real” people. I had grown accustomed, as I am sure many students have, to using tried and true techniques that I knew would appeal to my professors, but real world audiences are usually not made up of college professors, and along that same line, real world presentations aren’t usually aimed at an audience full of college students that are at least somewhat informed on the topic. The work students in Service-Learning courses cannot be replicated in any other type of class, because the opportunity to reach out to such a large and diverse audience cannot be replicated.

I’d like to close by reading another journal entry, my last journal entry in fact, dated April 12, 2005:

After going through the experience of a Service-Learning course, I can’t believe that more courses and professors don’t take advantage of this unique opportunity to expose undergraduate students to the challenging and rewarding process of providing their assistance, in the form of creating technical documents, to a non-profit or other community based organization. It seems so obvious a connection; students would gain hands-on experience and would have the opportunity to work with the projects and groups making documents of this nature anyway, and community organizations which may otherwise not have the resources and technical expertise to create these documents. It might be more work, but it may be a student’s only chance to do something like this before they get out into the real world.

Faculty as Mentor

The following is from Chapter 19 of Reconceptualizing the Faculty Role: Alternative Models, by James R. Chan, Michael V. Fortunato, Alan Mandell, Susan Oaks, and Duncan Ryan Mann. Copyright © 2001 by Anker Publishing Company, Inc. All rights reserved. ISBN 1-882982-35-5. Anker Publishing Company, Inc. 176 Ballville Road P.O. Box 249 Bolton, MA 01740-0249 [www.ankerpub.com]

A certain privilege has traditionally been associated with the status of the faculty member: access to specialized knowledge, the prerogative to identify what is important to learn, the right to impart that knowledge to those who come to us, and the right to determine how and why another has acquired appropriate learning. In conventional academic settings, the very expertise of the faculty has been framed by a set of boundaries that separated faculty from students. Faculty held the important knowledge, conveyed it to those who cared to know, and developed criteria for and carried out what was determined to be appropriate evaluation.

The presuppositions of such a model have been opened to debate by a range of issues and realities that now characterize our educational landscape. We live in a world where the question of what is important to know is not easily answered and where the amount of knowledge at least theoretically available to us continues to expand at a phenomenal rate: that is, in a world where such authority is no longer held by the suppressor clear and meaningful disciplinary conditions that informed so much of our own education and our identities as academic professionals have been thrown into question. No thoughtful faculty member need now mourn about whether there is to know to make final claims about that knowledge.

The following works in which we have worked have dramatically changed. The range of studies among our classrooms—in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, age, and life experience—has expanded. It is nearly impossible to prejudge who will know what they already know, what they want to know, and what tools we might employ to most effectively help them learn. What we had taken for granted before (however appropriately or inappropriately) we cannot assume today.
During the spring semester of 2005, Psychology major Diana Orem and Melody Bowdon co-taught a Technical Writing class this spring 2005, and I worked on a project with the East Central Florida AIDS Network on communication and transmission procedures or when conducting anti-discrimination training, as well as privacy laws and disability laws that might apply. Computer were newly installed in my classroom in 2005 and I wanted to figure out a way to effectively incorporate them into my teaching. The project I worked on was creating materials to promote awareness of stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS in the workplace. My group consisted of myself and 4 other members, and together we came up with the idea for targeting stigma in the workplace, because we wanted to choose a topic that we felt was sometimes overlooked in the larger campaign against stigma faced by PLWHA’s in general. We decided that creating a brochure would be an effective way to get our message out to a wide audience. Our vision is that companies will have a better understanding of the hospitality careers available. First, I thought of the students enrolled in the class itself. It continues to be a collection of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. These are all non-majors via the computer exercise, to the majors/minors it was “old hat.” The information gave me the feedback I needed to improve the exercise and truly meet the objective that I had set of broadening the student’s understanding of careers in the hospitality industry through the use of the computers in the classroom.

The advantage of having a survey guiding me in the class exercise with the computers was that it helped me focus and better gauge the effectiveness of the exercise while it was in process. I made mental notes of additional questions that should be added to the survey. The exercise was successful because, as always, students enjoy a break from the ordinary class lecture. However, as with any class exercise, I saw room for improvement.

After a few days I surveyed the students in class and I entered the data in SPSS. What I found out was that they had valuable suggestions that will help me improve the exercise in the open feedback back, and in the close-ended section of the survey, I found a way to make the exercise more meaningful given the diverse audience.

What I found is that the non-majors thought that the exercise was more helpful than the majors did. This made me realize that, while I was introducing new career options to the non-majors via the computer exercise, to the majors/minors it was “old hat.” The information gave me the feedback I needed to improve the exercise and truly meet the objective that I had set of broadening the student’s understanding of careers in the hospitality industry through the use of the computers in the classroom.

The update to this exercise that I will incorporate in future classes will be to place students in groups based on whether or not they are hospitality majors/minors. This will be a more effective exercise where they can utilize their prior experience, and the non-majors will be given the same exercise that was previously performed in class. From both horizons the results of what was found on the computer, ensuring that both groups get a broader understanding of the hospitality careers available.

Of course I will survey the students again to see if I am meeting my objective for the exercise. With this new-found knowledge of the connection of research and teaching, and how to use my research training in improving my teaching, I will continue to find ways in my other classes to make certain that all students have a chance to reach their fullest potential.

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Kevin Yee is an Academic Support Coordinator at the Faculty Center for Teaching & Learning, where he pursues his interests in interactive teaching, language and culture in the classroom, GTA development, and outreach to adjunct faculty. His research lately has focused on international faculty members and GTAs teaching in the American post-secondary setting.

In our non-credit graduate-level offering called “Preparation for College Teaching” each semester, we face a thorny problem. Professors have to grapple with: to what extent should students’ first introduction to material come from the instructor as opposed to students encountering that material in another setting before they enter our class? There are really only two choices. One method calls for the instructor to provide the introduction and framework for a given set of material, with the idea being that additional reading afterward serves as a review and a deepening of the knowledge. The other route is to ask students to read about a topic prior to it being discussed in class.

The latter option has the advantage that students will, at least, come into each class session armed with good foundational knowledge upon which the rest of the class can build. Alternately, they arrive full of inquisitiveness if the reading provokes thought. Even in the worst case scenario, if the reading confuses and engrosses the students, they still come to class engaged and bursting with questions. But there are potential risks too. What if students do not actually do the reading? Can instructors trust that ideas without an instructor’s roadmap will pull themselves out of the reading if they haven’t been given a context ahead of time?

Despite these concerns, we structured our Summer 2005 course in the fashion of the second option. Among other reasons, we wanted to appeal to the students’ desire to learn rather than to try to assume they wouldn’t learn without direct tutelage. We ensured a semester of highly engaged students actively examining teaching practices, curricular decisions, and classroom interactions even right there in our own class, which was intentionally held up as a model for discussion and dissection. As the course ended students were effusive with their praise but also did not hold back when offering suggestions for improvement. Surprisingly, they spoke with a nearly unified voice in calling for a different model of content delivery, with several claiming they would have benefited from having the material introduced in class before they went home to engage with it using their reading. A few even used the vocabulary of a “flaw” in our course design. Consequently, we shifted in Fall 2005 to the other model, and now hold class discussions on new topics before the students encounter that material in their readings. We contextualize as best we can, massaging the curriculum constantly to squeeze out maximum interactions and student engagement. To our surprise, we’ve found that this group of students does not display the same enthusiasm. In fact, in the same classroom we’re less prepared in the face to face discussions, do not incorporate much of the readings into their postings to the electronic discussion board, and do not respond as enthusiastically to the posts of the prior group. While each assembly of individuals inevitably yields a unique dynamic, the differences were so dramatic compared to the most recent class that we struggled to find causes. Like so many problems in education, this one seemed to have more than one possible culprit. It’s likely that the change from semester to semester accounts for some of the differing results; students have less time to dedicate to our class during the fall. But the switch in the nature of the content delivery is also a prime candidate to explain the results.

One particularly likely explanation: the students in summer were more engaged because having to struggle with the material before any introduction or contextualization by the instructors may have made it more difficult for them, but also more vibrant and more interesting at the same time. By not having the material clearly explained, they faced cognitive dissonance, a known motivator for learning under certain conditions. The incoherence (inconsistency) between attitudes, beliefs, and practices they encountered by doing readings and activities in the classroom and assignments in the textbook may have led to frustration, but it turns out to have been a particularly useful brand of frustration. It motivated them, and they came to each class feeling highly engaged. Perhaps we ought to be looking not to eliminate all frustrations from the student experience, but to maximize the right kinds of frustration.

Both models are built upon variations of constructivist foundations, with the intent that students will construct new ideas based on their past knowledge and experience. While the variant characterized by instructor-introduced content worked less effectively for us, it utilizes a belief that students will build on previously-acquired knowledge just as much as the other mode of content delivery.

It becomes clear only in hindsight that the student complaints and frustrations from the summer course should not have been perceived as a negative (make no mistake! lift our spirits and concerns and only students learning deeply from the course would reach this level of engagement. The lesson for us seems to be that having students perceive the course to be flawed, at least in this one way, is a “problem” deviously to be wished...