

## **Improve Student Learning the Old Fashioned Way: Have Them Read the Textbook\***

By Daniel Maher, Sociology and Cultural  
Anthropology

“Students don’t read the textbook!” This is a consistent faculty complaint. I, too, have been exasperated by students who have not looked at the course material since the last class meeting. Why don’t they read assigned material? Despite all of the rants and raves about the subject, I think the answer is quite simple: they don’t have to. This is a lesson I learned quickly in college. I confess I did not read a textbook as an undergraduate. I found that I could pass my classes without doing the reading assignments; like my students, I wanted to do only what I had to in order to get the grade I wanted and use the remainder of my time for recreation.

In my first three years of teaching, my students found they could pass easily without opening the text. My frustration over their lack of preparation was not diminished by the confession of my own similar behavior. The opposite was the case. I resolved to construct a syllabus that would encourage students to read the text material and come to class prepared to think about the assigned ideas. I assigned specific sections of the text, required students to take notes on those sections, and had them turn in their notes to be graded. This process was simply too labor intensive, both physically and mentally; I wanted to get all of their notes graded and returned promptly.

However, I had seen improvement in student involvement, so I didn’t want to give up on the note-taking assignment entirely. I finally hit upon the idea of collecting only a handful of student notes on very brief

### **Contents**

Improve Student Learning.....	1
New Co-Chair .....	1
Important Dates .....	2
Measuring Student Engagement .....	2
Assembling for Assessment .....	3
General Ed Assessment Timeline .....	3
CAAP Test Administration .....	5

### **New Co-Chair Announced**

Dr. Sandi Sanders, provost, has announced that Susan Whitlow, faculty member in English, will serve as co-chair of the Student Learning Committee. Susan’s position as co-chair takes effect with the Spring 2004 semester.

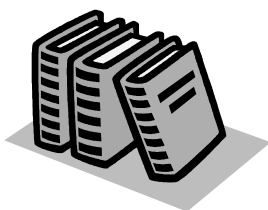
readings. Using an electronic grade book, I randomize the class; and instead of collecting the usual 35-40 student notes each class period, I only collect notes from the top five on the randomized list. Now, for each class period I assign between one and four very specific readings and randomly collect notes. These notes are graded and returned by the next class period, far easier to accomplish than when I was trying to grade and return 30+ right away. Of course, some students invariably escape having their notes collected via the random selection process, so occasionally I manipulate the process to make certain that an appropriate number of grades will be earned by every student.

Students' notes must include the key vocabulary terms, a summary paragraph of what they learned from the reading section, and any questions, comments, or observations they have about the section. While each note collection is only worth a small number of points, I have found that the points provide a sufficient incentive for a significant number of students to prepare for class.

After about six semesters of assigning and collecting text notes, I began to wonder if it really was making any difference in student learning. So, I discontinued the process for one semester. The change in student comportment was immediate and profound. I had grown accustomed to students asking questions and "running" with the material, and what I had returned to was a classroom of 30-40 students who were hearing material for the first time. I reinstated the process of requiring note taking, and now I cannot imagine teaching a course without it.

If you are frustrated by your students' disregard for reading the text, create the appropriate incentives for them to read. Grading their notes about assigned reading material has worked for me. Of course, I have discovered that some students do not participate, but most open their texts, write down terms, and give some thought to what they have read—that is much more effort than I used to get from them. Best of all, I am free of that dreaded faculty angst over student performance.

\*This article was published in the November 7, 2003 issue of Innovation Abstracts.



## Measuring Student Engagement — How You Can Help

During the Spring 2004 semester, the Office of Institutional Research and the Student Learning Committee will administer three important national surveys measuring student engagement in academics and co-curricular activities. Freshmen who entered the institution in Fall 2003 will participate in the Your First College Year Survey. Randomly selected freshmen and seniors will receive the National Survey of Student Engagement. And finally, the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement will be given via the web to all full-time faculty at UA Fort Smith. Surveying will take place between February and April. These surveys will provide data that will aid us in finding ways to improve student learning across campus. Encourage anyone receiving a survey to participate, including you! If you have questions, contact Marion Dunagan, Director of Institutional Research, at extension 7038 or email her at [mdunagan@uafortsmith.edu](mailto:mdunagan@uafortsmith.edu).

## Important Dates

January 22, 2004  
Student Learning Committee Meeting  
3:30 p.m., Flanders 114

Week of March 29 – April 3  
CAAP Testing

## Assembling for Assessment

By Susan Whitlow, English

Early this semester, a subcommittee consisting of Marion Dunagan, Kim Dean, David Dubriske, Suzanne Horne, Don Bailey, Ron Floyd, and Glenda Ezell was given the challenge by the Student Learning Committee of ushering the new faculty into our evolving student-centered culture. The question was how best to introduce concepts that would be new to many of these faculty members in a relatively short time and with an approach that would keep everyone's attention, even on a Friday afternoon.

The answer was a workshop that took place on, oddly enough, Halloween. What one might have expected to be an obstacle turned into an asset as some of the speakers took the opportunity presented by the holiday to liven up the proceedings by wearing costumes related to their own presentations. Others used candy as rewards to encourage audience participation. The result was a lively workshop that managed to communicate many of the goals, types, and methods of assessment while still keeping the audience engaged.

After a free lunch – another clear incentive for attendance – the group, composed of new faculty and members of the Student Learning Committee, was greeted by Dr. Sanders, who welcomed the assembly and congratulated everyone on the work they had done – and will do – to promote and shape student learning on this campus. The tone of the Provost's address set the stage for the workshop by making it clear both that the work of assessment is important and that we, as well as our students, can have fun while learning something new.

Marion Dunagan began the presentations by taking the audience through a demonstration of the Student Learning website, which includes explanations of the General Education Competencies, Student Learning Committee meeting minutes and membership, assessment plan and report forms, and other resources that

## General Education Assessment Timeline

The General Education competencies Quantitative Skills, Communications, and Global and Cultural Literacy are all on schedule to be assessed in Spring 2004. Faculty from these competency groups and members of the Student Learning Committee are currently working to determine appropriate assessment tools and testing procedures. Contact any Student Learning Committee member or competency group chair with ideas or comments.

For more information about General Education assessment, visit the Student Learning website at: <http://www.uafortsmith.edu/Learning/GeneralEducationAssessmentPlan>.

are available for all faculty. Since the assessment plans for all programs were due that same day, Marion took the opportunity to introduce the assessment cycle on campus, explaining the purpose and deadlines for the reports.

After Marion had introduced the idea behind these reports and explained where to find them online, David Dubriske followed up by defining some of the common assessment terms, picking up where Marion had left off with the assessment plan and report. David went on to explain the different types of assessment (classroom, program, general education, etc.) and some common assessment tools, like pre- and post-tests. To demonstrate his point about such tests as assessments, he used a pretest and a posttest to assess the group's understanding of the terms and tools he had mentioned. Because of time constraints, the tests couldn't function as actual

assessments, but the point was demonstrated nevertheless.

Next we shifted our focus from assessment to creating a learner-centered syllabus, another essential component of fostering student learning. Kim Dean used a PowerPoint demonstration to explain the differences between traditional syllabi and more effective student-centered syllabi. Especially important were the particular components that needed to be included in order for the syllabus to promote student learning from the very day of the course. Since Kim provided the group with a copy of her presentation, everyone was given some valuable hints that could be used to design next semester's syllabi.

Another feature of a learner-centered campus is faculty input and development through campus committees. Suzanne Horne followed Kim's presentation to explain the structure and function of the committees on our campus. Suzanne took a creative approach with her presentation, pasting information about each individual committee onto the back of giant puzzle pieces. She then selected "volunteers" from the audience to read the information on their individual pieces and, one-by-one, assemble the puzzle in front of the audience. The result was a striking image of a man's hand holding a crystal ball. The largest piece of the puzzle was the Student Learning Committee piece, which made up the man's hand, and the other pieces added the finger tips, the crystal ball, the man himself, and the rest of the background. By encouraging active participation Suzanne got the audience engaged, and by placing Student Learning at the center of her puzzle, making that piece the hand holding the rest of the picture together, she made a powerful statement about the emphasis our campus continues to place upon the importance of the learner.

After Suzanne's presentation, Don Bailey's team took the field. Dressed in a baseball uniform, authentic down to the black grease paint under his eyes, Don addressed the group by beginning to speak about...his wife. Don

explained how his wife had no interest in baseball, often sitting in the stands reading a book during his own games, until he explained the signals the coaches and players were using on the field. Then once she knew the language, she became quite a fan, not only understanding the plays that were being called but even predicting the coaches' strategies.



Don drove his metaphor home by then explaining those same signals to us and to his teammates – Kim Dean and Sid Connor, who were both also dressed in baseball uniforms – so that we could understand some simple calls. Once his teammates understood what he wanted – a bunt and a steal – they were able to perform the play, almost without a hitch. (You try batting an imaginary ball in a room full of your colleagues.)

Don's point became clear as he applied this same need for clear signals to assessment and explained how important it is that we all speak the same language, understand our common terms, and keep our objectives and our communication clear. He then finished his presentation by dealing with some common questions about and objections to classroom and program assessment.

Next, the subcommittee needed to explain the general education competencies to the new faculty. We might have expected definitions of each competency and some explanation about the importance of each. That information was in fact presented, but it came in the form of a handout. The presentation itself was of an entirely different flavor.

Dr. Roger Roderick, Dean of Business, introduced a skit in which the two players were Dr. Roland Smith, Dean of Education, and Dr. Linda Tichenor. Dr. Smith played a somewhat flustered but well-meaning academic advisor in the college of education while Linda played the role of a student who thought she might want to be an elementary teacher as long as she got

summers off, didn't have to deal with poorly behaved children, and never had to know any math of any kind. Linda immersed herself in the role, both looking and sounding like a college professor's worst nightmare. In effect, she demonstrated the general education competencies by portraying someone who possessed none of those abilities – except perhaps creativity.

Finally, just before our afternoon drew to a close, Ron Floyd represented the faculty in the IT program by discussing their use of authentic

assessment. He explained the program's use of electronic portfolios and its emphasis on those assignments that students can then refine and present to future employers as evidence of their abilities. Ron

introduced one authentic assessment to the group and gave us a chance to play the student's role for a moment to see what would be involved in successfully completing the given assignment. Although time was short and we didn't get the opportunity to complete our task, Ron was able to give us an idea of the type of authentic assessments that his students complete and the level of learning that is required to complete those assignments successfully.

Finally, before we left to begin our evenings of Halloween parties and trick-or-treating, we took a moment to fill out some evaluations to assess the effectiveness of the workshop. The most gratifying piece of information to emerge from these questionnaires was the 95.5% of those in attendance who said they felt the information in the workshop would be useful to their own teaching, and the 50% of those in the group who felt "confident" about assessment and planned to use – or continue using – classroom assessment.

Some suggestions for improvement the committee received were to include samples to



illustrate the best elements of learner-centered syllabi, to have the workshop earlier in the fall semester so that everyone is introduced to these concepts before the assessment plans are due on November 1, and to keep in mind that some of the new faculty will already be familiar with assessment goals, terms, and tools. Of course, in assessment, all feedback is valuable; perhaps these comments will help the committee to continue creating effective and enjoyable workshops to further promote a learner-centered culture on our campus.



## CAAP Test Administration

Sophomores with between 45 and 60 earned hours will take the CAAP test in April. The CAAP test, given in November and April each year, measures general education gains in College Algebra, Writing, Reading and Science. Be sure to encourage your students to make this test a priority. Students will receive letters and emails reminding them of the test. The Student Learning Committee will also be sending reminders for you to share with students closer to the April testing dates. If you have any questions about the test, contact Diane Partrick, Director of Testing, at extension 7662 or email her at [dpartric@uafortsmith.edu](mailto:dpartric@uafortsmith.edu).



Student Learning Matters is published by the Student Learning Committee of the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith.

## **General Education Competency Committees with Assessment Reports Due October 2004**

### Competency Committee: *Global and Cultural Perspectives*

Chairs: Todd Timmons and Dan Maher

Don Bailey	R. Kannan
Prissy Buchanan	Rosario Nolasco-Bell
Tom Buchanan	Ginger Osburn
Sydney Fulbright	Ken Patton
Debbie Fulmer	Monica Snyder
Gary Hoppes	Leslie Toombs
Kelly Jennings	Emma Watts

### Competency Committee: *Communications*

Chairs: Connie Phillips and Cammie Sublette

Larry Baker	Zoe Morgan
Martha Bieber	Becky Mroczek
Michael Crawford	Diana Payne
Nancy Hawking	Michael Reynolds
Jack Jackson II	Don Tannehill
Joe Liston	Tom Walton

### Competency Committee: *Quantitative Reasoning*

Chairs: Jill Guerra and George Schmidt

Rita Bates	Matt McCoy
Steve Henderson	Mat Pitsch
Paul Johnston	Phillip Russell
Bobby Jones	Rosilee Walker
Mary Lowe	Donna Wright
Monica Luebke	