

To Give Students a Jolt, Let Them Write the Quiz

It's a dilemma familiar to nearly everyone in the professoriate: Class discussion is much richer if students have read and seriously engaged the material before class. On the other hand, pop quizzes and other efforts to make students prepare for class can so poison the classroom atmosphere that everybody loses.

What to do?

Have students ask thoughtful questions about the reading and insist that students tie the reading into the class discussions, Martin Benjamin, a Michigan State philosophy professor, told participants at a CTSE workshop on pedagogy on October 6.

"Much of education centers on students answering questions posed by their teachers. There's nothing wrong with this," Benjamin told nearly 50 faculty members at the Common Hour workshop. "But if this is all they can do, students will remain dependent on others for their



Martin Benjamin, a philosophy professor at Michigan State, challenges students to think by asking them to frame thoughtful questions.

learning. Educated men and women should be able to do more than just answer other people's questions.

"They should be able to figure out for themselves what sorts of questions need asking," he said.

To encourage this sort of thinking, Benjamin has developed what he calls a reflection paper, a weekly one-page assignment he requires of all his students (to reduce grading time in very large classes, he makes the papers due every other week, with half the class due each week.)

The reflection paper asks two questions:

1. What, to your mind, is the most interesting or important *unanswered question* raised in or by the class meeting *prior* to the one at which the paper is due – *and why?*

2. What, to your mind, is the most *interesting* or *important* point raised in or by the reading assignment assigned *for* the class meeting at which the paper is due – *and why?*

By "unanswered question," Benjamin explained, "I mean an interesting and important difficult question – one to which there is, as far as you can tell, no easy answer. It's a question you'd like to have the answer to, but you don't know at this point what it is.

"If, after stating the question, you can give a simple, snappy answer to it, the question is not a good one. It is not difficult or unanswered," he said.

The weekly paper assignment is graded on a regular four-point scale. In aggregate, the assignments count 20 to 25 per-

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Helping Web Surfers Learn to Test the Waters

There is probably no more difficult task for a teacher than trying to reach students who have convinced themselves that they are bored. Given the millions of Web sites now available with a mouse click, how can I blame them? My immediate reaction is to blame the medium. The frustrated professor inside me sees TVs and PCs as the fast food processing of knowledge. I can try to be entertaining, but I'm not Dave Chappelle, and I am not sure I would want to turn my classroom into an MTV reality show. But the old routine of syllabi, expensive textbooks, chalkboards and final exams is part of the problem. So how can I *net* student interest in what I think is the most interesting thing in the world?

I am old-fashioned enough – well, perhaps just old enough – to believe that knowledge comes mainly through reading. Testing what is read against experience can even lead to that slippery ideal of wisdom. Today's students have not stopped reading, but many have learned to get by without having to read books, at least the kind we often assign as texts in our courses. We can argue all day about why students are more easily bored in university classrooms these days, but the bottom line may be that our pedagogy is pedestrian. I suggest that we are not keeping pace with our students' world in which information comes from monitors, not monotonous lectures. The old reference librarian wears glasses and is soft-spoken; the new bridge to archived knowledge is Google.

About six years ago I decided to take the bull by its virtual horns. Even before Hofstra had a server for faculty Web sites, I created a Web-based class assignment on my personal, pop-up prone, Geocities Web site. The first day of class I asked if there were any students who did not use the Web. When no one raised a hand, I knew I was onto something. The primary purpose of these "Webservations," as I have come to call them, is the most revered of pedagogical goals: to stimulate critical thinking. Students were starting to get most of their information from the Internet, but had little idea how to evaluate the sites themselves. When I sent a student to the library to write a paper, I could assume that the books there



Dan Varisco

The chairman of the anthropology department, Dan Varisco, teaches students to do critical analysis of online sources of information.

were mainly academic and not overt propaganda. But the educational depth of the World Wide Web is a Pandora's Box.

My Web critique assignments have strict guidelines. I look for a short essay of about 3-4 pages based on a critical assessment of the sites visited. I choose the sites to complement the course material and force students to interact with

information that is relevant to what they are learning in the classroom. I provide general guidelines and then usually three targeted analyses with sets of Web sites to examine. The point is not to do term-paper description – a point I cannot emphasize enough – but to think about the ways in which sites convince the students about the accuracy or representativeness of the material given. How is the message massaged? Like an Easter egg hunt, I make sure there are a few well-biased eggs waiting to be uncovered.

The guidelines are generic, things to keep in mind while examining the sites.

- *What can you learn about the person or group that put the site together? Are you able to tell if it is a reputable person or mainstream organization? Are the names of the writers or creators indicated, and do they solicit feedback? Try to contact the writer or creator by e-mail, and indicate what happens.*
- *To whom is the site directed? Is it trying to convert you to an idea? Do you think it has a commercial interest (trying to get money from you)?*
- *What do you find the most useful aspect of the site? How user-friendly is it?*
- *From your perspective, do you find any bias, misleading or erroneous information on the site? Do you find information that contradicts or confirms what you*

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Mind the Gap: Rethinking Classroom Strategies

Each year, the University grants several sabbatical leaves to faculty for projects that deal specifically with pedagogical issues. These Special Teaching Leaves provide faculty members time away from regular responsibilities to develop ideas and methods to enhance teaching excellence. The CTSE reviews applications each fall and makes recommendations to the Senate Faculty Affairs Committee for choosing recipients of the Special Teaching Leaves. Recognizing the tremendous breadth of insight, innovation and research that may be stimulated during a teaching leave, the CTSE does not limit applications to any particular topic or field. Faculty may, for example, use the time to investigate larger pedagogical theories, devise instructional methods, or study problems and crises in education. To date, 34 faculty members have been awarded Special Teaching Leaves. Each fall, the Special Teaching Leave recipients from the prior year are showcased in a presentation titled “Program on Scholarship in Teaching” to which all faculty and administrators are invited.

Bruce A. Torff, associate professor of curriculum and teaching in the School of Education and Allied Human Services, was awarded a Special Teaching Leave in the fall of 2003. In fall 2004 he reported on the research conducted during that leave to a meeting of the faculty sponsored by CTSE. He prepared a written version of that presentation for this publication.



Bruce Torff

Special Teaching Leaves give professors like Bruce Torff the opportunity to gain new perspectives on classroom issues.

As a teacher educator, I devoted my Special Teaching Leave in Fall 2003 to research investigating one of the causes of persistent achievement gaps in PreK-12 education, with the goal of enhancing my courses to better prepare teachers for working with low-advantage learners.

Every day in the classroom, teachers decide between activities in which information is transmitted to learners and activities in which learners think for themselves and draw their own conclusions.

These decisions are influenced by teachers’ beliefs about what learning is and how

the mind develops – and in particular, whether higher-order cognitive processes depend on lower-order ones, such that learners need to have a knowledge base before they can think productively. Teachers who hold such views may prefer activities low in critical thinking (CT) for low-advantage learners while emphasizing high-CT activities for high-advantage ones, opening a source of inequity in schools (especially with high-stakes tests increasingly requiring high-CT performances such as essay writing).

To investigate this possibility, I developed a four-factor questionnaire – the *Critical*

Thinking Belief Appraisal (CTBA) – that assesses teachers’ beliefs about the effectiveness of high- and low-CT activities for high- and low-advantage learners. The CTBA was developed and used in a set of five research initiatives:

1. In a series of five validation studies, the CTBA produced scores with high reliability, a stable factor structure, and satisfactory discriminant, construct and predictive validity.
2. Teachers’ beliefs evinced strong “advantage effects” (i.e., both high-CT and low-CT activities were rated as more effective for high-advantage learners than low-advantage ones) and somewhat weaker “pedagogical preference effects” (i.e., high-CT activities were rated as more effective than low-CT activities for both populations. Effect sizes obtained suggest that teachers tend to favor high-CT activities for high-advantage learners and low-CT activities for low-advantage ones.
3. Prospective teachers had positive attitudes about high-CT activities for both populations (relative to non-teacher controls), but this enthusiasm diminished somewhat during preservice education. For teacher educators who value high-CT instruction, the

How to Earn a Special Teaching Leave

Bruce Torff offered these tips a faculty member should consider when preparing an application for a special teaching leave.

1. Include an executive summary or abstract (150 words).
2. Prepare a detailed plan for your project, not a rough sketch.
3. Write the plan such that the intelligent lay reader (i.e., folks outside your field) can penetrate it, as if writing for *The New York Times*.
4. Make the case for the need for your project. In the language of grant-writing, set out a clear and compelling problematique.
5. Be specific as to how your project will benefit Hofstra students.
6. Show why and how a leave is needed for the project to come to fruition; make the case for extended time off; consider adding a timeline.
7. Be clear about the goals of your research and state what makes this research valuable.

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Statistics for the Innumerate: Learn the Language

Michael J. Barnes, associate professor of psychology, is the CTSE's quantitative analysis consultant. In that capacity, in 2003-04 he presented a three-session mini-course in statistics for faculty who need to use numbers in their work, but whose knowledge of statistics is thin to non-existent. He agreed to condense his course into a set of essays for this newsletter.

Many people are extremely perturbed when they hear the word "statistics." Horrible images of past experiences come to mind. The reality is that while statistics is a field replete with its own language, it is actually a method by which our lives and understanding are made simpler and clearer, not more complicated and abstruse. The biggest problem is ... understanding its language!

The objective of statistics is to organize and summarize data, and thereby create useful information. This information provides us with an opportunity to make decisions in the face of uncertainty.

Initially, faced with a set of data, one works to describe that data. Data can be described in several ways, using measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion/variability. Measures of central tendency include the mean, the mode and the median.

The reason we call them measures of central tendency is that they tend to be found

in the middle of the data, after they are arranged from highest to lowest (or from lowest to highest). The mean is simply the arithmetic average of a set of numerical data. The median is the positional central one; that is, it is directly in the middle of a numerical data set. The mode is the most frequently occurring value in a data set, or the category or name that has the largest number of things in it or attached to it. Each one is valuable in its own way. However, when the data are numerical or quantitative, the mean is the best one to use. It has the most "redeeming qualities" when it comes to statistical applications.

Measures of central tendency also allow us to determine the shape of distributions. For example, if a distribution is such that the mean, median and mode are all the same, the distribution is considered "bell-shaped" or normal, a very common distribution. If a distribution has two modes, it is called bimodal. If a distribution has only one mode and its mean is larger than its median, and the median falls somewhere between the mean and the mode, the distribution is considered positively skewed. Many people who see a skewed distribution remark of its resemblance to a whale. In the case of the positively skewed distribution, the tail of the whale is on the right side, or at the positive end of a number line.

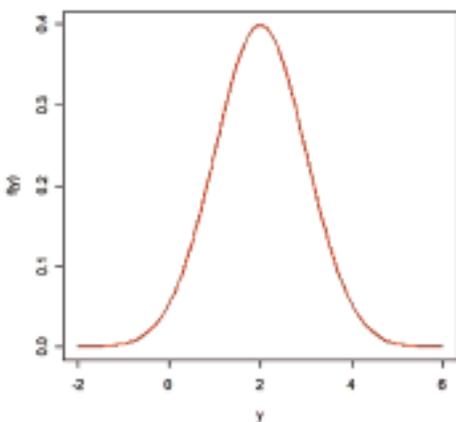
Measures of dispersion or variability are important, because they indicate how much the numbers differ from one another. These include variance, standard deviation, range

and fractiles (e.g., percentiles and quartiles). Of these, the range is the simplest and easiest to compute. It is the difference between the highest and lowest values of a set of data. Fractiles involve breaking up the data into equal parts. Therefore, percentiles separate the data into 100 equal parts, while quartiles separate the data into four equal parts. They are also positional, that is, they indicate the value at or below which some portion of the values lie. For example, a value at the 50th percentile is the value such that 50 percent of the values lie at or below. Likewise, a value at the third quartile is the value at or below which three-quarters of the values lie.

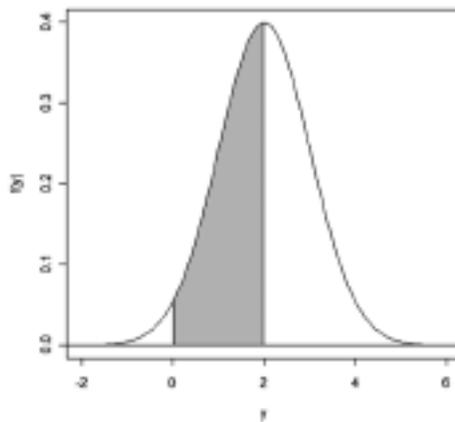
The variance and standard deviation are a bit more difficult to describe. However, they provide us with a wealth of information, especially if the shape of the distribution of data is known. For example, if the data conform to a normal shape, regardless of the mean or the value of the standard deviation, roughly two-thirds of the data lie within one standard deviation of the mean. So, if the mean was 100 and the standard deviation was 15, roughly two-thirds of the scores or values would be between 85 and 115.

Moreover, roughly 95 percent of the values would lie within two standard deviations of the mean (i.e., between 70 and 130), while practically all the scores would fall within three standard deviations of the mean (i.e., between 55 and 145). The standard deviation also tells us how accurate the mean is to describing/summarizing a set of data. The smaller the standard deviation, the more likely the mean is a good representation of the data. (The variance is just the square of the standard deviation, so that if you know one, it is easy to compute the other.)

These tools are used to describe and summarize data. In my next piece, I will present how these summary statistics are used to make predictions and decisions.



A normal distribution: here's what the much-discussed "bell curve" looks like. For this one, the mean is 2, and the standard deviation is 1.



The shaded area represents the probability of outcomes between values of 0 and 2, about 47.5% of the total area under the curve.

Let's Go Global!



A panel about international opportunities

FINDING THE RIGHT GRANT Sofia Kakoulidis, associate provost for research and sponsored programs (second from left), walked faculty members through the basic steps of finding and winning research grants, especially overseas, at a CTSE-sponsored panel discussion on Wednesday, November 3. It's easy, really. And she prom-

ises to help "every step of the way." Others on the panel, sharing their own success stories and strategies for finding and securing opportunities overseas for research and teaching, were (from left) Patricia Welch, assistant professor of comparative literature and language; James E. Hickey, director of international programs at the Law School;

Shawn Thelen, assistant professor of marketing and international business; Laurie Johnson, professor of counseling, research, special education and rehabilitation; Robert A. Leonard, professor of comparative literature and language; and Tara J. Radin, assistant professor of management, entrepreneurship and general business.

Bruce Torff: New Ways to Prepare Teachers *(continued from page 3)*

task at hand is not to foster a higher level of support for high-CT activities, but to mitigate erosion of existing support for these activities.

4. Relative to randomly selected inservice teachers, supervisor-nominated expert teachers were more favorable to high-CT activities, less favorable to low-CT ones, and less inclined to differentiate instruction according to perceived learner advantages. Teacher-education initiatives are apparently needed to promote expert beliefs about (and use of) high-CT and low-CT activities for different learner populations, with emphasis on high-CT activities for low-advantage learners.

5. Two studies, one qualitative and one quantitative, revealed six issues

associated with teachers' preferences for low-CT activities for low-advantage learners (in decreasing order of effect size): learners' level of prior knowledge; time constraints; influence of parents; influence of colleagues; learners' motivation level; and learners' level of academic ability (Torff & Sessions, submitted). These issues are relevant for teacher educators interested in equitable access to high-CT instruction.

The process of incorporating this work into my courses at Hofstra has begun. In particular:

a) Students respond to journal questions requiring them to analyze use of high- and low-CT activities with low-advantage learners in their field-observation sites.

b) Students respond to journal questions that induce reflection on the six issues found to be associated with preferences for low-CT activities for low-advantage learners.

c) Students complete assignments in which they analyze effective and ineffective models of high-CT instruction with low-advantage learners.

d) Students create their own instructional designs emphasizing high-CT instruction for low-advantage learners.

I hope these initiatives will help Hofstra better prepare new teachers to give low-advantage learners every opportunity to succeed in school.

Martin Benjamin: Quizzing the Professor *(continued from page 1)*

cent of the overall course grade. He said he tries to keep the grading time down to about five minutes per paper, with a one-day turnaround, that is, each set of papers is returned to the students at the next class period.

The reflection papers are vastly better than pop quizzes, Benjamin said, because “real learning takes place.” The writing assignment grew out of a three-minute assignment he used previously. That short assignment, given at the end of each class period, asked two questions: “What was the most important point made in today’s class or in the readings for today?” And,



“What is the most important question raised in today’s class or the readings for today?” Those three-minute papers were graded pass/fail. He eventually gave up on them because he grew jealous of the time they took away from class.

The reflection papers insist on both class attendance and engaged reading of the material. “As teachers we need to prepare our students to answer questions that, at this point, we cannot even imagine,” he said.” This, in turn, requires providing more opportunities for students to say and write things to which the best brief, positive response is: “Good question!”

Got a Project? The Center Can Help

Dear Hofstra Colleagues,

As you know, the CTSE’s primary purpose is to promote excellence in all the scholarly activities of Hofstra’s faculty. To that end, the CTSE sponsors many programs for faculty, including special teaching leaves, mentoring for new faculty, distinguished visiting guest lecturers, workshops, manuscript review, videotaping, confidential consulting, statistical consulting, program evaluation, and others. The CTSE recognizes the outstanding contributions Hofstra’s faculty make to University life by awarding memberships in the CTSE to faculty applicants who demonstrate both past excellence in teaching and other areas of scholarship as well as a commitment to advancing excellence through CTSE programs in the future.

The CTSE would like to increase the recognition awarded to its highly accomplished faculty by informing faculty members about national awards programs and encouraging them to apply for such awards. Here are some examples.

The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), in conjunction with The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, sponsors the U.S. Professors of the Year Award Program to increase awareness of the importance

of undergraduate instruction. It also sponsors the State Professors of the Year Award Program in all 50 states. Both national and state winners are chosen on the basis of their extraordinary dedication to undergraduate teaching, as indicated by their impact on and involvement with undergraduate students; scholarly approach to teaching and learning; contributions to undergraduate education in the institution, community and profession; and support from colleagues and current and former undergraduate students. Information about these awards is available at www.case.org and www.carnegiefoundation.org.

The National Education Association offers an Art of Teaching Prize for an essay that explains a professor’s approach for inspiring students with a love of learning or an article that offers practical approaches to improving teaching and learning at the college level. Information is available at www.nea.org.

Finally, Baylor University sponsors the Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teaching. It is designed to honor great teachers, stimulate discussion in the academy about the value of teaching, and encourage departments and institutions to value their own great teachers. The winner of the Cherry Award receives a \$200,000 prize and teaches in residence



at Baylor for a semester, with travel expenses and a furnished apartment provided. Additionally, the winner’s home department receives \$25,000. Information is available at www.baylor.edu/Cherry_Awards.

I know many inspiring educators at Hofstra who should be successful applicants for such awards. I hope they will apply. The CTSE would be delighted to assist in any way possible with the applications.

Best regards,
Susan Lorde Martin
Director, CTSE

Dan Varisco: Surfers Test the Waters (continued from page 2)

have learned in class? If so, what is the response of the site webmasters if you are able to send your comments or criticism?

- Find something specific on the site that relates to the course material or discussion. Discuss what you find and relate it directly to examples from the course for class discussion.

The targeted questions invite the student to focus on issues relevant to the course material. For example, in my cross-cultural core course on Cultural Diversity (Anthropology 4), I chose a recent controversy within the discipline. Students had been reading about the ways in which anthropologists study so-called “primitive” peoples, but had a tendency to think this was something far removed from their world. The assignment asked them to

compare a site attacking the credibility of Napoleon Chagnon, who worked among the Amazon Yanomamo in Venezuela, with the response of the anthropologist being criticized. The student’s job was to decide how they were influenced, not to judge who was right.

So has this pedagogically engineered surfing worked? Are students more interested in the class material because they are encouraged to surf outside the text-and-lecture circuit? On the plus side, I find less complaining about this assignment. Some students even say it was one of the more interesting things they did in the course. On the minus side, these Webservations often show the tendency in exams and essays to repeat information without critical evaluation. My goal is not

to substitute Web sites for texts, so I am not suggesting that the off-the-wall notion of going online whole hog. But I think there is a pedagogical win-win situation in forcing students to be more critical about where they are getting their information. If netting student interest whets their appetite for learning, then I will encourage them to keep on clicking.

[Dr. Varisco’s class Web critiques are archived online. For the specific example provided in this essay, see http://people.hofstra.edu/faculty/daniel_m_varisco/a4web.html.]

Dan Varisco
Associate Professor and Chair
Department of Anthropology

Editing Aid Can Polish Your Manuscript

In the spring 2004 semester, the Center for Teaching and Scholarly Excellence instituted the position of English editing consultant as a response to requests from faculty members who wished to have their manuscripts edited for standard English grammar and usage. I am delighted to perform this service.

The program has been quite successful. To date I have edited about a dozen manuscripts, at an average of 20 pages each, from faculty members around the campus. Most of the submissions have been from faculty in the Zarb School of Business, but there also have been submissions from New College and the School of Education and Allied Human Services. I have particularly enjoyed learning about the exciting work my colleagues are doing in their respective fields.

While the editing service was originally designed for non-native speakers of English, we were pleased to see that a number of native speakers of English also



Carol Porr promises to edit your paper within a week.

took advantage of my services. It should be noted that I do not edit for content or for editorial policies of specific journals; my services are strictly focused on the writer’s use of standard English grammar and usage.

I come to this position with an M.A. in English literature from Hofstra. In my 17 years at the University, I have worked primarily as assistant to the director of the Composition Program as well as adjunct instructor in the English department, where I have taught English Composition, Introduction to Literature, and English Grammar. Previously I worked as editorial assistant for *Twentieth Century Literature*, a Hofstra University publication.

Papers should be submitted in hard copy to my office in 208 Calkins. I will return the edited manuscript no later than one week after I receive it. If you have any questions about the editing service, I can be reached by phone at 463-5252, or by e-mail at engjcp@hofstra.edu.

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