Reflections

A look back at some of the best stories, tips and blogs of the 2013-14 academic year with Carleton University’s Teaching and Learning Services.

Creativity in the classroom

By: Shawn Graham, Carleton History Professor
May 2013

I’ve had some spectacular fails in my teaching practice. When I first started out, I would look around at what other folks were doing and decide, ‘yes – that’s the thing! I’ll do that!’ More often than not, it would crash and burn. But why? It worked for so-and-so; I just must not be doing it right. Or maybe it depends on the particular dynamics of the group. Or maybe it was the year.

If I’ve learned anything about being creative in the classroom, it could be summed up in two words: “be authentic.” When things have gone wrong for me, it’s because what I was trying to do was not authentic – either to myself or to the situation.

For instance, I blog a lot. I find a lot of value in sharing my thoughts, my works in progress, my wins and my fails with a broader community. Blogging as part of the coursework in my classes should therefore be ‘authentic,’ right? As it happens, no, not really. Most of my students, if they think about blogging at all, regard it as rather passé; they don’t do it, and asking them to do it as part of the coursework just becomes another hoop to jump through.

The first time I tried it in a class at the university level – asking students to blog about readings – it quickly became a rote activity with no added value, a way of ticking off the ‘participation’ box. After some

So back I’d go to the well, draw another draught of wisdom, and try again. Sometimes it’d work; sometimes not. What made the difference? Was it the particular well I was drawing from? I do read some of the scholarship on teaching and learning in higher education. I follow a lot of folks on Twitter. I’ve been in a lot of classrooms. I’ve been fortunate enough to work with, and learn from, some excellent teachers over the last several years. Nope, probably not the well.

As the cliché goes, ‘it’s not you, it’s me.’ If I’ve learned anything about being creative in the classroom, it could be summed up in two words: “be authentic.” When things have gone wrong for me, it’s because what I was trying to do was not authentic – either to myself or to the situation.

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The first time I tried it in a class at the university level – asking students to blog about readings – it quickly became a rote activity with no added value, a way of ticking off the ‘participation’ box. After some
reflection, I realized that for this to be an authentic activity for the students, it had to reconnect to what was going on in the classroom and to their other assignments and to the other students. It had to become integral to the learning, not a bolted-on afterthought.

Drawing on the teaching practice of Mark Sample (now at George Mason University, but shortly moving to Davidson College), I assigned different weekly groups of students to respond to the readings on the course blog, prior to the week's sessions. Another group of students would then present the first group’s posts to the class to kick-off discussion and a third group would then draw out the interesting elements of the discussion in final capstone blog posts. You can read the course blog at 3812.graeworks.net.

The exercise was successful I think for a number of reasons, but what fostered the most creativity in class and out was the way the activity required each group to be a pillar for the next group's work. It was that ‘integrity’ that made the blogging so much more authentic this time around. True creativity lies in dealing with constraints and identifying authentic tasks is one such constraint.

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**Innovation is not about reinventing the wheel... or using new technology**

By: Samah Sabra, EDC Teaching Development Coordinator
May 2013

Often, when I speak with contract instructors, instructors and faculty, they express surprise when I tell them they are innovative. With last week’s annual Canadian Network for Innovation in Education conference being hosted at Carleton, I had a lot of time to think about how we define innovation in education.

CNIE is a national organization which, in its mission statement, is defined as “the voice for Canada’s distance and open education communities.” The CNIE website has quite a bit on educational technology, framed as a way of ensuring justice, inclusivity and accessibility. New technologies can, and I would say, most certainly should be used to achieve these goals. Innovation in education, however, is not only about using the latest technologies. I think it is the conflation of innovation and new technology that leaves so many educators I talk to with a sense that they have nothing innovative in their pedagogical toolkits or that they are not creative in their teaching.

Over the last few years that I have been a graduate student, contract instructor and educational developer at Carleton, I have spoken to Legal Studies professors who teach through literature, a Canadian Studies professor who asked students to research key players in political debates and participate in classroom discussions as that person, and professors across several departments who give students the option of submitting non-traditional expressions of their academic arguments.

These professors certainly take risks with their students, but rather than fearing failure, they embrace the learning opportunities for themselves and students that come with taking such risks. These professors are creative, they are innovative and they give their students the opportunity to surprise them through their own creativity. Most importantly, these professors and their students are creative and innovative in ways that do not rely on the use of new technologies.

This is not to say, of course, that new
Being innovative is about taking risks by bringing things together that may not have previously been associated with one another in education.

-Samah Sabra

technologies do not offer avenues for innovative teaching. They do. One professor this year gave her students the task of using such technologies to communicate ideas from their various disciplines to one another and the results were amazing! Yet, even at the CNIE conference, there were papers about applying “old practices in non-traditional ways,” like using peer instruction – long associated with clickers – without technology, and the use of comic strips in medical education.

Being innovative, in other words, is not simply about using digital technologies to communicate with students or to have them communicate with one another. Being innovative is about taking risks by bringing things together that may not have previously been associated with one another in education: comic books and medicine, literature and law, painting and social science. In each of these cases, what emerges as we hear instructors speak about their classes is a sense that using a different medium of expression often offers us new perspectives on the world around us.

When new perspectives become available to us and the students in our classes, the learning environment is enriched by a deeper engagement with the material being taught. What is old becomes new again, it becomes exciting, there are new avenues to explore, new insights to share. Innovation is not just about new technologies. It is, instead, about developing new standpoints, intellectual invigoration and collaborative discovery. It is something we all do in our own ways. It is time we began to recognize and celebrate this.

Cell phones in the classroom

By: Sabrina Doyle, CUOL Staff Writer
July 2013

Cell phone use in the classroom is often seen as something worthy of reprimand. It’s a distraction, a bad habit. But two professors at Carleton are actually encouraging students to use cell phones in class. Kim Hellemans and Bruce Tsuji talked about why and how they did it at the 2013 Canadian Network for Innovation in Education annual conference, which was held at Carleton. CUOL talked to each professor and got summaries of their joint presentations.

Research has shown that after about 30 minutes, our attention span begins to wane. When that happens, we start getting twitchy; in the classroom setting, Kim Hellemans says students will start checking their phones and browsing Facebook. She took that knowledge and made a built-in phone checking & internet time, which was still related to coursework.

It goes like this. Hellemans puts a question up on the projector, with multiple-choice answers. Students then text their choice answer to polleverywhere.com. In this way, students get a built-in mini break, and Hellemans gets anonymous feedback on how much her students are actually understanding.

If only 30 per cent of respondents got the answer correct, Hellemans begins an activity called peer assisted learning. Each student pairs up someone who had a different answer than them, and then states the case for why their own answer is right. In theory, the student with the right answer will be more confident and more able to explain their reasoning to the other student. Hellemans then reposes the question to see if a higher percentage of people got it right.

During the presentation to her peers, Hellemans showed some
screenshots of data prior to and after peer assisted learning, to show that more students do in fact get it correct after the peer assisted learning. “I think the future is online and more faculty should be open to using new techniques in their teaching,” Hellemans says. While she hasn’t organized any formal feedback of the texting system, students have informally admitted they appreciated the service, with some students even writing on her teacher evaluation that they’d like polleveverywhere.com to be even more integrated.

While not every student in class texts in an answer, the majority does, says Hellemans. She’s also been using it to engage her distance students. After the lecture, she’ll keep the poll open, so that by the time the distance students watch it, they can still send in their responses for certain comprehension questions.

Tsuji’s experience with integrating cellphone use in the classroom was constructed as more of an open discussion. Instead of using polleveverywhere.com to ask questions of the students, he used it as a way for students to send questions to him. Whatever they sent in would be broadcast on the projector screen for the whole class to see. As such, a few students seized the opportunity to send in inappropriate texts. The tamest caused brief giggles to ripple through the class, however some were more upsetting. “I really scratched my head a bit over the eight months or so that I was using this system,” Tsuji says.

It turns out, says Tsuji, that the research into university student participation levels makes some pretty dismal conclusions. One paper concluded that 64 per cent of students would never ask or answer a single question in class during their entire university career. Teachers don’t really think about that too much because, as Tsuji says, they weren’t one of those 64 per cent. In big classes – Tsuji’s class peaked at about 750 students – he thinks that statistic would be even worse.

“We were the ones who did ask questions, who overcame shyness and stuck our hand up.”

Tsuji struggled with what to do next. The whole point of the anonymous, open digital questioning system was to help shy students break out of their shells and actually answer questions while not becoming too uncomfortable. Should he let a few irreverent students ruin the opportunity for all? Eventually, he says he came upon “a dumb little YouTube video,” which would change his outlook on the situation.

The video was of a baseball game; it was the seventh inning stretch. People were rising from their seats in search of bathrooms and hotdog vendors, but one kid was dancing around, furiously trying to attract the jumbotron camera and broadcast his image to the stadium. It made Tsuji think. “It seems to be a very human need to have ourselves out there in some way, shape or form. To have ourselves seen, or be heard.” He likened the boy at the baseball game to some of the students in class. “People are just trying to get a few moments of, I don’t know, fame, notoriety, make themselves known for a brief period of time.”

If students in these ever-growing classrooms are faced with the prospect of living out their entire university careers without asking a single question, the texted questions may be a chance for students who might otherwise have never asked a question to make their voice heard. However, Tsuji says that at the beginning of the semesters he will have to explain very clearly why he is allowing the occasional irrelevant message to slide up on the big screen.

“Maybe in my class it will be an off-colour remark texted in, but maybe next time in another class they’ll ask a real live serious question. If I can get a few of those students in the habit of interacting with their instructors and with the other students, well maybe that’s not such a bad thing.”©
Reflections — The Best of TLS

Mentors in academia

By: Morgan Rooney,
EDC Educational Developer
July 2013

Whether you are pursuing your Master’s or PhD, actively searching for an academic job, or just settling into your shiny new faculty position, the early career of the aspiring teacher-scholar can be a bewildering experience. What are my professors’ expectations? How does one survive comprehensive exams or write 300 pages on one topic anyway? What professional development options are out there, and what specific options should aspiring teacher-scholars in my field pursue? What conferences should I attend, and what are the peer-reviewed journals and presses that I should court or shun?

Looking back, I see now that I never would have completed my doctorate or developed the CV I have now without the support of the mentors in my life. Undoubtedly, my professors were a crucial cog in that mentoring network; in particular my supervisor was instrumental in advising me on issues such as the overall shape of my dissertation project, the conference venues, journals and presses I ought to target, and the job application process. Equally important, however, were the contributions of peers who volunteered their time and energy to mentor me, with no expectation of any return whatsoever. That spirit of collegial giving, of a disinterested commitment to a shared enterprise of learning and scholarship, is and always has been what makes academia so appealing for me.

At each stage of my doctorate – course work, comprehensive exams, and dissertation proposal, writing and defence – I leaned on the experience of peers who had recently climbed the mountain I was about to attempt. Among my fellow graduate students and conference attendees, I developed a network of peers who mentored me on a range of issues, from delivering papers to getting published to surviving the on-campus interview. I recall vividly, for instance, spending three hours on the phone with one such valued colleague the week before I had my first interview for an academic post. One runs out of encomiums for such people who donate their time, knowledge and support so freely.

One of the amazing outcomes of undergoing such experiences, above and beyond the completion of this or that specific daunting task, is the way mentoring becomes ingrained in your system. As I passed through each stage, I progressed, slowly but surely, from anxious mentee to wily veteran mentor. Not only did I feel that I had an obligation to provide the same level of support I had received, but I was convinced of its value, and I actively sought out avenues that would allow me to act on that conviction. Participating in my department’s Graduate Student Association was particularly rewarding in that sense, as it afforded me the opportunity to spearhead such mentoring initiatives. That same commitment to mentoring underwrites, too, my sense of myself as a teacher-scholar and administrator today.

A few years after completing my PhD, I now find myself working as an Educational Developer, where one of my main tasks is to oversee the Mentor Program. Funded by the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs and affiliated with select departments, the Mentor Program institutionalizes the kinds...
Helping new faculty members transition into the academic community

By: Anthony Marini, EDC Senior Teaching Development Associate
July 2013

As someone who has spent much of their academic career working with university instructors in promoting teaching excellence, new faculty hires are of a particular interest to me. Part of that interest stems from the fact that new faculty members face significant challenges as they take on their first academic appointments. For example, despite the fact that many of these individuals have little, if any, teaching preparation, they can be assigned some of the most demanding teaching roles typically involving very large lecture courses.

In addition to teaching requirements, new faculty often encounter difficulties simply understanding the culture and structure of their university. While they may have encountered some elements of this culture as graduate students, the complexities of facing these elements as new faculty members can be bewildering.

Unlike many other professions where a period of internship precedes formal entrance into the profession – such as those typically found in the health professions or articling associated with the legal profession – new academics do not generally have an opportunity to develop the professional skills designed to help them transition into actual practice. This lack of preparation can often result in frustration and stress in the initial years of their appointment, which can serve as a significant barrier in building a strong foundation to their careers and positioning them well in terms of attaining tenure.

In order to assist new faculty in experiencing a productive first year, a number of Canadian universities have begun to explore formal mentoring programs. The response from new faculty has been generally very positive and many participants have experienced a much better adjustment and specific benefits, including high grant application success and greater comfort with their teaching assignments.

While mentoring is not altogether new in the university setting, much of what occurred in the past was informal and did not achieve the targeted outcomes. More formal programs generally have the support of key administrators, consider what kind of training a mentor may need,
monitor progress and are more reflective in matching senior faculty with new hires.

Moreover, there is a growing belief that traditional models of mentoring characterized by one mentor and one mentee may not be the most effective approach. Increasingly, consideration is being given to models of mentoring that have a new faculty member interact with a number of senior faculty. The case for this more expanded model of mentoring addresses issues such as the heavy workload that traditional models place on a single mentor and acknowledges that the needs of new faculty can be better addressed by working with a number of faculty members, each contributing a varied set of skills and background.

In establishing mentor programs, universities would directly address a need frequently voiced by new hires and assist new faculty in becoming more positive and contributing members of the university community.

In addition to New Faculty Orientation, Carleton’s Teaching and Learning Services offers a learning community aimed at facilitating new faculty’s adjustment process as they begin their new venture at Carleton. Learn more about it at carleton.ca/edc/programs/learning-communities.

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Massive Open Online Courses

By: Chelsey Burnside, CUOL Staff Writer
September 2013

What if you had access to an Ivy League education, online and for free? Sounds too good to be true, doesn’t it? Well, that’s the thinking behind massive open online courses (commonly known as MOOCs).

In a nutshell, it’s education adapted to suit an over-informed world: low-cost and high-quality learning at the fingertips of the masses. With crème de la crème institutions like Harvard, Yale and UC Berkeley hopping on the MOOC bandwagon, top-tier education in everything from astronomy to modern poetry can be made available around the globe, as well as used by teachers to supplement lectures and students to elevate their learning experience. And for those whose 8 a.m. Friday morning classes...
With crème de la crème institutions like Harvard, Yale and UC Berkeley hopping on the MOOC bandwagon, top-tier education in everything from astronomy to modern poetry can be made available around the globe.

-Chelsey Burnside

are trumped by Thirsty Thursdays, the MOOC advantage would allow students to take the course on their own time.

Yes, there is the undeniable glitchiness that comes hand-in-broadband with video-based online courses—system crashes, login failures, and Skype calls that sound like they’ve been transmitted through a broken blender. However, judging by the rate MOOCs have progressed since their inception, these technical difficulties will be short-lived.

The success of MOOC providers like Udacity, edX and Coursera (which now enlists 70,000 new users per week) has piqued the interest of Canadian universities—Carleton being no exception. While they still have some hurdles to overcome (How do you monetize an education rooted in openness and accessibility to everyone? Without a real-time classroom setting, how do we ensure questions are answered and students don’t fall behind? When will they be recognized as credit courses?), it’s widely speculated that blended curriculums with MOOC content are in our foreseeable future.

So, how does a professor ensure these “massive” courses don’t veer into one-size-fits-all territory? With their emphasis on student engagement and reaching those genuinely interested in a given subject, the hope is that an online community of like-minded students is formed through each MOOC. Professors and teaching assistants will gain profile for their teaching styles—like Coursera’s calculus lessons taught using animations hand-drawn by University of Pennsylvania professor Robert Ghrist (during which it’s not uncommon to see a zombie arm or two).

By adapting the traditional classroom setting to make room for online supplementation, like they’ve done at Harvard with MOOC mentors, open web-based learning could be the future of higher education—it’s all about finding that fine balance. ☝
Reflections — The Best of TLS

Live Online Proctoring (LOP):
To LOP or not to LOP

By: Nestor Querido,
CUOL Supervisor
September 2013

The advent of online learning in higher education is a key part of the 21st century learning experience. A considerable proportion of students nowadays are more inclined toward taking online courses because of the expediency and the convenience that they offer. Many of them see this as effective solutions to meeting the demands of their personal, family and work commitments.

This is where the need arises to integrate suitable technology that supports online learning and mitigates the ever-growing demands for online courses. Consequently, many institutions are trying to catch up to be in the forefront on this paradigm shift.

In my line of work, we deal with online students, and while there are good percentages that are on campus, many of them are distance learners. Proctoring their exams, particularly those that reside abroad or in remote areas of the country, has been challenging. Hence, maintaining the integrity of exams becomes even more essential and a primary concern for all three constituents: the university, the instructors and the administrators.

I’ll be talking more about all these three constituents later, but for now, my focus is on a technology that we are piloting this fall term in five different courses called Live Online Proctoring (LOP). This is a step forward to the current practice that we do for our ‘global’ students, the proctored secure PDF exams.

LOP started in 2008, and since then almost 500 institutions worldwide have implemented it. As far as I know, the post-secondary institutions in Canada in different stages of engaging with LOP include the University of Toronto, Memorial University, Royal Roads University and Wilfrid Laurier University, as well as a number of colleges. The feedback that I have received provided positive reviews and testimonials of the service.

The process is fairly straightforward. When the online exam begins, the proctor (ratio 1:4) watches the students throughout the entire duration of the exam and records any movements, sounds, keystrokes, etc. The proctor also has control of the student’s computer and can stop the exam if he or she notices any irregularities. An example from a Chronicle of Higher Education article on the subject mentioned tracking irregular eye movement— “one student attached a sticky note below the webcam, but a proctor caught him glancing up at the note and made him hold a mirror up to the screen. Busted.”

Understandably, there are concerns that LOP is insecure, that the integrity of the exam is compromised, and the authentication process is not trustworthy, factual or reliable. To dispel these concerns, I have further investigated and considered these facts:

Pros

- A ratio of 1:4 as opposed to 1:50
- It is recorded instead of merely glancing at the student in the exam room
- The professor can review any incidents on video
- The proctor has control over the student’s computer. This is better than an individual distance proctor
- Online exams are created through cuLearn, our own portal
- Proctoring of the proctors. Proctors are also monitored
- LOP seems more stringent than anything that takes place in a
large lecture hall on test day. It takes the time and goes to these lengths to validate a test taker – not true in a room of 100+ students.

**Cons**

- It’s invasive
- The proctors’ qualifications (I have requested documentation on the qualifications of their proctors)
- Authentication – a student could fool the proctor with fake ID
- There is the possibility that a proctor might try to collude with a test-taker to cheat, or jot down the content of a particular exam with the intention of selling it to future students taking the same course
- Proctors who work from home are liable to get distracted

Would this technology meet our criteria for proper invigilation? Reports from other institutions are positive, but we’ll have to be on the lookout. Appropriate invigilation requires finding the right balance among the constituents. The needs of the students, the [accessibility] requirements of legitimate proctors, and the university’s prescribed invigilation policies have to be met.

First, we need to look at the needs of the students. When the shipping cost of an exam exceeded the course fee, we were prompted to find better ways to invigilate our distance students. As a step forward, we have implemented proctored secure PDF exams (password protected). This currently meets our standard for proctoring our ‘global' students. We know the exam is closely guarded. At present, this is the best way, to our knowledge, of preserving the integrity of the exam for distance students.

Second, the concerns of our faculty members must be in the forefront. I will give a specific detailed example. At the CUOL AGM on Aug. 29 we proposed a pilot project on LOP. There were three questions that were asked, specifically:

1. How does the proctor address a power outage during an online exam? What is the proper protocol for handling this situation?
2. What’s the procedure if a student asks for a washroom break during an online exam?
3. If you allow a washroom break (which you really must, given how our bodies work), how do you guard against cheating?

Getting the answers to these questions provides some assurance to our faculty members (all answers are quoted from the exam proctor provider, except for one, as indicated).

1. A power outage for the student less than 5 minutes long is automatically reconnected to their proctor when they get their internet back. Beyond 5 minutes they will need to call and re-schedule. In a power outage for the proctor, the student is automatically reassigned to another available proctor, and in most cases the student doesn’t even realize this. Once the original proctor is back up, the student is transferred back.
2. Have or conduct a two-part exam; after completing the first part, have a washroom break and then resume by releasing the second part of the exam (suggested by an internal staff). We enter a “yes” or “no” in our scheduler as to allowing it or not. It is specific to the exam, so if you have some profs who allow it and some that don’t, we can accommodate.
3. We are aligned on the policy for cheating. We send the professor an exception notification via email that we suspect a student is cheating. The professor can contact us for a copy of the video and make that determination themselves. This way the exam is completed and the decision is left in the hands of the professor after they review the video files. We do a room scan when they return. You will have to make the decision to allow or not allow breaks though. Also, if your testing center has a policy on bio breaks, we should try to use that.

And finally, we have to be heedful at the set of rules and regulations the university has given us. Whatever solutions we come up with, they must conform to the university’s requirements and adhere to the policies that are put in place.

Because the infrastructure for LOP has greatly improved, the old biases against online proctoring are diminishing and the companies that offer remote-proctoring services are now facing acceptance from many universities.

Concerns, myths and uncertainties aside, we’re thrilled to be incorporating Live Online Proctoring into our CUOL curriculum this fall.

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**How it works**

Using his or her own computer and webcam, the student can take exams at home, at work, or anywhere they have internet access.

1. The student connects with a live proctor from one of the online proctoring centres in Toronto via web cam. The proctor will help the student through the exam processes – they are there to help if technical difficulties arise.
2. The student then connects his or her computer screen to the proctor. This allows the proctor to see the student’s screen and to assist with the setup before the start of the exam.
3. The proctor will ask the student to show two photo IDs, preferably one Carleton ID. The proctor then takes a photo of the student. Further authentication is necessary and the proctor will ask the student to answer a few questions generated from the information we provide.
Incorporating research into teaching

EDC Teaching Tip
January 2014

Carleton University prides itself on being a great research-intensive institution that also provides an engaging and excellent learning environment for students. Often we view teaching and research as two separate practices. This does not need to be the case; your research can be directly incorporated into your teaching.

What is research-led teaching? From the University of Auckland Commentary newsletter, “Research-led teaching reflects and makes use of the instructor’s disciplinary research to benefit student learning and outcomes.”

At the undergraduate level, your research is most easily integrated into the curriculum.

When designing your lessons, lectures and activities, Carleton Biology professor Mark Forbes notes that students at all levels often respond positively to lectures that highlight recent research that is relevant to course material. Even the choice of textbook or readings is fundamentally important to incorporating research into your teaching. Grab hold of those texts or readings that focus on the “how” (strength of particular approaches) and the “why” (societal or other relevance) when addressing problems.

Whatever your strategy for incorporating more research into teaching, it is important to remember that research is not research (in fact it is not anything) until it is effectively communicated – through your teaching, you are helping to communicate and share research.

Tips for incorporating research into teaching

▶ Include results and your ideas of your research into your course(s).
▶ Build assessments that include students developing research skills (i.e., literature reviews, critically reading articles, publishing to a publicly accessible site).
▶ Have students use the research tools of their discipline. This could include software, conducting experiments, using research equipment and primary sources.
▶ Be inclusive and involve undergraduate students in research seminars, guest speakers and symposia.
▶ Deploy students to do research. Give credit for original and/or industrious research.
▶ Take the time to uncover which studies were lead by students. Students respond well to studies done by other students.
▶ Make use of internships or real-world opportunities. Independent laboratory exercises or independent special projects will help foster research creativity if students are encouraged to explore the problem from multiple angles and not simply endeavour to get the “right” answer.
▶ Manage expectations. Ask students how long they think it took to do a study. They might be surprised by the answer of years!
▶ Educate on evidence based and inferential strength. Even if students do not become researchers, they will be become better citizens.
▶ Conduct a class project where data is collated from various groups and analyzed together.
Teaching on the flip side:

Reflections on Richard Nimijean’s experience in a flipped classroom

By: Cassandra Hendry, TLS Staff Writer
February 2014

In thousands of classrooms across Canada, students sit in bolted-down chairs, periodically nodding off as a professor drones on for three hours straight. In these classes, a lecture truly lives up to its name. It’s not always pretty.

And then there’s Richard Nimijean’s classes.

Nimijean, a professor of Canadian Studies at Carleton, decided that he wanted to try a new way of teaching: a flipped classroom.

Flipping a classroom means that the traditional professor-student dynamic is thrown out the window in favor of a co-operative learning environment where students think critically about the course material. This includes creating discussion questions for break-out groups in class, participating in cuLearn exercises, and keeping PowerPoint presentations brief to promote active learning and avoid distractions.

“Flipping is a little bit dangerous but also a lot of fun,” says Nimijean.

He tried again in 2013 in his next major first-year class, now armed with a better understanding of flipping from the past year and a half. Term papers and lectures were gone; Nimijean introduced break-out groups, one minute essays, and final papers that made students think critically about real world scenarios.

“I think students do recognize when you’re trying, when you’re passionate, when you listen to them and respect them,” he says.

Flipping didn’t always live up to Nimijean’s expectations, though. Some students found it too challenging and were confused by his break from the traditional lecture atmosphere.

Any time you try to do something different, there’s always a fear that’s involved because you’re going away from what’s known, not only for you but for your students.”

Nimijean’s first experience in flipping was while teaching a Canadian Studies course in the summer semester of 2012. He faced some difficulties as students could choose to watch the course online—which meant a vibrant classroom atmosphere wasn’t possible with only six students.

Despite my intentions, it turned into a three hour lecturefest twice a week,” he says.

Learn more about the flipped classroom

► The University of Texas at Austin’s Center for Teaching and Learning - What is the Flipped Classroom? ctl.utexas.edu/teaching/flipping_a_class/what_is_flipped
► Educause - 7 Things You Should Know About Flipped Classrooms net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/el7081.pdf
► Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching - Flipping the Classroom cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/flipping-the-classroom
► Eric Mazur’s Special Presentation at Carleton on Peer Instruction youtube.com/watch?v=Ay3SVyDNTrg
Reflections — The Best of TLS

phere. After receiving some negative midterm reviews by students, he decided to revert back to the standard teaching method.

“You feel like you’re really putting yourself out there. But it was seen as a burden precisely by those students who you’re trying to help the most,” he says.

Despite the stumbling blocks, Nimijean says he’d like to try it again, calling it a “great experience.” This time, he says he’ll stick to upper-year classes, where participation and stimulating class discussion are more welcomed.

“I think the benefits are there, but as I’m reflecting on things now, it could always be better. It’s an ongoing experiment.”

Learning to teach in new spaces

By: Samah Sabra,
EDC Teaching Development Coordinator
February 2014

A
s my tour of the new Discovery Centre on the fourth floor of Carleton’s MacOdrum Library ended, my head was spinning – in the best way possible. If you don’t already know this about me, part of my interdisciplinary social science graduate education was in cultural geography. I had no background in geography when I first started my Master’s degree and only then did I discover that studying geography means a lot more than GIS, rivers, glaciers and maps! It was then that I was introduced to the possibilities that open up when we study the interrelationships between space, its meanings and social relations. While there may be more “professional” ways of saying this, my discovery of cultural geography was nothing short of mind blowing and it shaped the doctoral research I undertook in the School of Canadian Studies here at Carleton University. As I walked through the Discovery Centre, that mind blowing experience was reproduced and it was impossible for me not to consider the spatiality of educational culture in a new way.

In my teaching, I often invite students to analyze the ways in which their classrooms were set up in their elementary and secondary schools. What messages about social interactions within those spaces were being communicated to them? What messages about power relationships? What did the configurations of their desks suggest about how they were supposed to interact (or not) with other students or with their teachers? When and how did they learn these unspoken rules? When did they fol-
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-Samah Sabra

low or challenge such rules? How did they do so? Despite these questions, I have to admit that I have not spent a lot of time considering the same questions in relation to my own teaching practices. Yet, if such messages were lurking within the configurations of educational spaces, their social meanings were also being communicated to the teachers – and this is no less the case in post-secondary education.

It’s not that I have never thought about the meanings of teaching and learning that are implicit in taken-for-granted configurations of educational spaces. Yet, the Discovery Centre’s mobile furniture, which students can reconfigure in whatever ways are most conducive to their own learning, made me hyper-aware of how rare it is for spaces like this to exist at post-secondary institutions. This, for me, suggested that students were being empowered to design their own learning experiences and, to be honest, it made me happy and proud to have such a space at Carleton.

Indeed, I was delighted at the prospect of teaching or facilitating workshops at the learning lab. Here was a space with no obvious “front of the room,” a space which ideally decentres the teacher and lets students know that they can collaborate with one another to discover new answers to their questions.

Then came the day that I finally facilitated a workshop in that space: rather than being de-centred as the source of knowledge in that space and miraculously becoming “the guide on the side,” I became a mobile centre. I had the eerie experience of all of the eyes and heads in the room simply shifting in response to my changing position in the room. There was no physical front, there was a moving front, and it moved with me! I found within this experience a jarring reminder that spaces do not simply transform our practices, but that our own practices can transform spaces.

In other words, the kinds of activities that succeeded in undoing some of the rigid structures and messages of lecture halls were suddenly too structured and rigid in this new space. I had to learn how to teach or facilitate all over again in this new kind of learning space: as soon as I stood up from one of the mobile chairs, a new structure was imposed within the room. This is not necessarily a bad thing – although I certainly want those in attendance to feel like they can and should contribute to creating the learning space we share, I also need them to follow the (flexible) structure of the workshop.

My point here is that different kinds of learning spaces do reproduce certain meanings and interactions around knowledge-sharing within post-secondary educational institutions, but as with any space, what we do within and how we use those spaces also shapes our own and others’ interpretations of those meanings. This is why de Certeau (de Certeau, M. (1984), The practice of everyday life) argued that we can “poach” the meanings of certain technologies, ideas or spaces. It is, I think, why many instructors can successfully incorporate small group work into large lecture halls!

I hope that you will take this blog post, the first of a series about educational spaces and cultures, as an invitation to join the conversation about the various spaces on our campus where we teach and learn. I know that we will not all have the same experiences of these spaces, but we can learn from one another about the different tactics that can transform educational spaces and interactions. 🌐
Anna Fox says she had an unlikely start in diagnostic assessment. “I went into testing because I hate tests,” she laughs.

Though her feelings on the matter have changed, that impulse never stopped - assessment has become the Carleton linguistic professor’s life’s work. She says it’s so important because assessment is an everyday reality.

“Even when a teacher asks a question and scans the room to see how students are responding – that’s a form of assessment. It’s part and parcel of every learning and educational act. It’s also a major player in who gets to do what.”

Fox has made it her mission to ensure that a strong testing system exists so that people – whether students, job applicants or new immigrants – are observed properly by assessors and go through a testing process that is both fair and looks for skills beyond traditional reading comprehension.
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-Janna Fox

Her work is well respected. She’s advised government on public service and citizenship testing, and in 2003, she was awarded the prestigious 3M National Teaching Fellowship, which acknowledges educators who excel in teaching and contribute to its development across disciplines.

Fox is currently in the midst of a project with Carleton’s engineering department, one she hopes to see adopted by other departments.

Dubbed the “Safe” project, it’s a form of assessment that’s embedded in a first-year course and looks at various vulnerabilities – from linguistic to math – to determine the strengths and weaknesses of first-time students.

That way, teachers can adjust approaches and design coursework that best serves their students’ needs.

“It attempts to identify students who may be at risk,” says Fox, adding it’s important to note the approach is not remedial. It also identifies unknown strengths. Five years in, Fox says the engineering project is a success but still has room to grow.

“I like to initiate and create a snowball, and then let the hill carry it.”

She’s been building snowballs since the beginning of her career, when Fox taught English in Mexico as a first-time instructor.

“I discovered a love of teaching language. That kindled a spark in me,” she says. Throw in Qatar, Pakistan and a four-year stint in Seychelles where she built the tri-lingual 115-island country’s curriculum.

But at Carleton she found her home. It’s also where she became the principle developer of the Canadian Academic English Language Assessment (CAEL), now a nationwide program that assesses English language proficiency. At its inception in the late ‘90s, she says the “state of the art” approach was known as “the Carleton test.” It became the focus of her master’s, and then PhD research.

Fox says she feels like she has a mission to make assessment better, and that her passion has made her a better teacher, too.

“The more you know by actively engaging in research, the more effective you are as a teacher because you speak with the understanding of the practical side,” she says. “I think I’m doing what I was designed to do.”

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