

UNIVERSITY  
AT ALBANY  
State University of New York

# Teaching at ALBANY

VOL. 3.1 SEPTEMBER 2008



## Upcoming Events for Faculty and Instructional Staff

### Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Students and Difficult Situations

Thursday, September 25  
3:00 - 4:30 PM Terrace Lounge

### Creating a Grade Book in Excel: Open House

Thursday, October 2  
1:00 - 4:00 PM Library ULB-16

### The Student Learning Portfolio: Beyond Tests, Presentations and Papers

Monday, October 6  
3:00 - 4:30 PM Terrace Lounge  
Tuesday, October 7  
2:30 - 4:00 PM Levitt Room\*

\*Event will be held on the Downtown Campus

### Incorporating Media & Podcasting into Your Teaching

Wednesday, October 22  
3:00 - 4:30 PM Terrace Lounge

## Upcoming Events for Graduate Students

### Writing Grant Proposals as a Graduate Student

Thursday, October 23  
2:30 - 4:30 PM Assembly Hall

### Teaching Portfolios for Future Faculty

Wednesday, October 29  
2:30 - 4:00 PM Terrace Lounge

### Preparing for the Academic Job Interview

Wednesday, November 5  
2:30 - 4:00 PM Terrace Lounge

## Midterm Feedback Surveys

ITLAL now provides voluntary midterm feedback surveys for all faculty and instructional staff. Surveys conducted at mid-semester can reveal a lot about what students are thinking and how much learning is actually taking place.

Please visit our website to see if we have a survey that fits your needs.  
<http://www.albany.edu/teachingandlearning/services/reqSurvey.shtml>

## Team-based Learning: A Test Case

### A UAlbany faculty member narrates her journey

Barbara Rio, a faculty member from the School of Social Welfare, has been using collaborative learning for several years but recently decided to adopt elements of the specific collaborative approach promoted by Larry Michaelsen, author of *Team-Based Learning*. Team-Based Learning (TBL) is a method that holds student teams accountable for their learning while also ensuring that individuals pull their weight. A key element is that teams have to make decisions for which they receive immediate feedback and evaluation. The result is a dynamic that helps students move more quickly toward taking full responsibility for their learning. *Teaching@Albany* caught up with Barbara recently and asked her to describe her recent experiences.

#### T@A: What made you decide to use Team-based learning?

BR: I always considered my biggest strength to be my ability to engage students in discussion through use of examples from my own practice. My classes were generally three hours long divided roughly into thirds. In the first hour I would give a lecture where I would explain concepts and pose questions to the class that would result in discussion. I would then move on to an application activity related to the lecture. At times this included a video demonstration, a role play or a small group assignment. The last hour would be dedicated to processing the experience through discussion.

I decided to try out TBL because I thought it might be a way to get students more excited about learning, and to have them struggle so as to use their critical thinking muscles. Also, team-based learning seemed to be teaching a set of social work skills that students don't usually get to practice until they get to the field – e.g., working as part of a team, collaboration and communication. It also gave me the opportunity to see their interpersonal skills in action, which is helpful in thinking about making their field placements, which is important to me in my other role as Field Director.

#### T@A: What kind of changes did you need to make in your teaching to do this?

BR: TBL made me rethink how I was teaching, although the approach was not completely new to me. Before discussing a reading students take a quiz individually and then repeat the same quiz in teams using a scratch-off form that gives them immediate feedback. The team quizzes seemed to make students more accountable to each other, and they provoked intense discussion. Since I had always given quizzes to ensure students did the reading, I only needed to revamp them so that they were shorter and just captured the essence of the unit. I found that I was able to quickly grade the individual quizzes while students were engaged in the group quiz. This allowed me to find out immediately which points needed to be focused on in that class period.

Second, team-based learning has a 'backward' approach that uses lectures to supplement discussions, rather than the other way around. I had to learn to eliminate the usual lectures and, instead, challenge the students with application exercises prior to a lecture, working backwards from there to see what information needed to be filled in. Getting comfortable with the "teaching backwards" idea and facilitating the discussion after the application exercise was a little intimidating at first. I just had to trust that I could run with whatever happened, which made me feel a lot less safe than having a canned lecture. In the beginning I tried to pre-plan carefully what I thought might be useful, but after a while I gave up and just trusted myself and my knowledge of the material.

#### T@A: How about the experiential activities and the role plays; did they change too?

BR: Yes, I modified the application exercises in ways that encouraged more teamwork, more discussion and more debate within the teams. I took a cue from Larry Michaelsen and created questions that forced my students to use class materials and their own experiences to make one informed decision as a team rather than give opinions and report out. I looked at the exercises I had been doing and modified them to fit the new model. I threw out 2/3 of my PowerPoint slides. I also started the semester off with a case study about a patient named Joe that we looked at through many lenses over the course of the semester. As we would assimilate new material I would say, "let's

revisit the case of Joe.” It gave the class common ground to work from and helped them to deepen their understanding of the material. At times I would find students mentioning how the class material applied to Joe’s case even without my prompting. What was surprising was how the students came up with more than I expected them to in their groups and, sometimes, more than I did.

**T@A: At the end of it all, what was most frustrating?**

BR: This type of teaching requires a lot more front-loaded preparation than in a traditional lecture class—making up the quizzes, fine tuning the exercises, scaling down long PowerPoint presentations to 4-5 essential ones. Before the quizzes, I would give students a chance to ask questions about the readings and sometimes their questions pertained to a particular sentence or paragraph which I didn’t remember. So I felt the need to be extremely conversant with the readings. I should add, however, that even though it was a lot of work up front, it was also very enjoyable. And when I teach the course again this way, the prep work will be a lot less.

**T@A: How did the students react to working in teams?**

BR: I expected some would balk at the idea of getting team grades on quizzes as well as not having clearly packaged PowerPoint presentations and notes, but the students did not protest and seemed open to the idea. At midterm I had them do an evaluation of the team-based approach and the results were very positive—which helped me to calm down. The students expressed how much fun they were having and that they felt like they were learning more (often much more) than in other classes. When the students took the first quiz and did poorly on it they seemed worried about how it would affect their grades. So I spent some time in the next class teaching them how to read for the salient points. From then on the grades were better on the team quizzes than on the individual quizzes in nearly all of the cases and the students relaxed.

In all, I was surprised at how much fun it was. The students were vocal about how much they enjoyed the class, the discussions were livelier than I had ever seen, and there were very few absences. There were times when groups struggled with interpersonal issues—which I made a decision to stay out of and trust the process. This was hard for me; however, in the end we discussed those experiences as a class and it was apparent that the students had grown through the struggle and learned things about themselves. Probably because their grades depended on their ability to work as a team, they stuck with it and worked it out.

**T@A: What effect did using this method of teaching have on your students’ learning?**

BR: Students seemed to carry the learning over from week to week more than in the past. They said that it was because they had discussed intensely, or in

some cases argued about the quiz answers and cases—so much so that they would never forget them. Because of this, the learning increased exponentially and went much deeper than in past classes. By the end of the semester I felt as if the students were better prepared than in previous years. Here are some of the comments my students gave in the anonymous midterm and end-of-semester feedback:

*“I liked how we took the quizzes individually and then as a group because it made the material stick more.”*

*“It made learning so much more powerful because questions were discussed rather than just an answer given.”*

*“Overall, I really enjoyed the class. Honestly, my best class this semester despite the papers. I feel I really learned a lot.”*

**T@A: It sounds like your students did a lot of work. How were your evaluations?**

BR: It is hard to tell definitively how this new method of teaching has directly influenced my SIRFs, but the numbers from this semester compared with the last two times I taught this same course are promising.

Year	Course	Instructor
2005	4.0	4.44
2006	4.5	4.5
2007	4.87	4.93

**T@A: Do you have any advice for someone who is thinking about trying team-based learning in their classes?**

BR: Trust the process, trust yourself and your knowledge of the material, and Have Fun!

For general information on Team-Based Learning...

**Larry Michaelsen’s webpage**

<http://www.ou.edu/pii/teamlearning/materials.htm>

**Team-Based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Groups**

edited by Larry K. Michaelsen, Arletta B. Knight, and L. Dee Fink.

**Team-Based Learning Collaborative**

<http://www.tlcollaborative.org/>



INSTITUTE FOR TEACHING, LEARNING  
AND ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK  
SS 251  
1400 WASHINGTON AVENUE  
ALBANY, NY 12222-0001

Non-Profit  
Organization  
US Postage  
**PAID**

Albany, New York  
Permit No. 205