

UNIVERSITY
AT ALBANY
State University of New York

Teaching *at* ALBANY

VOL. 3.2 MARCH 2009



ITLAL Special Event: Two Guest Workshops

by
Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D.

Friday, March 20, 2009
Alumni House



11:00-12:30: Teaching that Promotes Learning

This workshop will be based on the presenter's book, *Learner-Centered Teaching*, which links the research on learning to five areas of instructional practice that directly influence how much and how well students learn.

12:30: Lunch

1:00-2:30: Successfully Implementing Change

Devoted to the process of successfully implementing new approaches, strategies and techniques, this workshop will identify a series of steps that help ensure that change leads to positive learning outcomes.

Please RSVP if you are interested in attending : 442-5521 or teachingandlearning@albany.edu

Do Your Students Feel Responsible for their Own Learning?

Two Guest Workshops by Maryellen Weimer, The Pennsylvania State University

After almost fifteen years of working in university research and administration, Maryellen Weimer voluntarily returned to the undergraduate classroom because of her belief in the importance of classroom teaching. Upon her return, she made a conscious and informed decision to teach differently than she had in the early part of her career, and she worked to create a course that focused primarily not on the content or the teacher but on the learners. What she discovered is the fundamental idea that shapes her book, *Learner-Centered Teaching*. If we want students to become motivated and responsible for their learning, we have to find ways to put them in positions of greater responsibility and control. We have to rethink the role of learner, and therefore—by logical extension—what it means to be a teacher.

ITLAL had the opportunity to ask Dr. Weimer some questions about her experiences and the advice she would give to faculty members who are interested in helping to foster some of the same changes in their students.

Why are so many of our students so passive and dependent?

Two reasons, I think. First, instruction continues to be very didactic. A large survey of US faculty documents that 76% still list the lecture as their instructional method of choice. Lecturing doesn't have to encourage passivity, but a lot of it does. Second, students are dependent and want education "done unto them," because they aren't empowered, confident learners. They don't trust themselves to make decisions about learning—even simple decisions like how long a "short" reaction paper might need to be.

What kinds of changes did you need to make in your thinking when you decided to create more learner-centered courses? What kinds of changes did you need to make in your practices?

After reading John Biggs' work on teaching and learning, I came to understand that what happened in the classroom should focus on what the students were doing. Before, I was always thinking about what I was doing and really never thought about planning teaching actions in response to what the students were doing. Once I started thinking about teaching as being supportive of the main action—what students were doing, I made a lot of changes in my practice. For example, I stopped doing as many of the learning activities for students. I don't need to learn how to sum up a presentation: I already know how to do that. Students, on the other hand, need to learn how to offer a summary after having heard a presentation of material—and they don't learn how to do that without practicing. So, during those last five minutes of class when it's time to pull everything together, I stopped doing that for students and started getting them involved in activities that helped them learn how to summarize.

What do you say to your colleagues who are concerned that reducing content coverage leads to less rigor?

I ask them this question: How much content is enough? For too long we have assumed that more is always better with respect to content. Given the rate at which information is exploding in virtually every discipline and how technology now puts a world of information at our fingertips, we need to be thinking about how much content is enough in a course, say, for non majors, or in a degree program.

Second, just because content is covered doesn't mean learning has occurred. I don't think teachers have met their duty by just covering material. They have an obligation to teach in ways that promote learning and

racing through material often doesn't promote the kind of deep and lasting learning we would hope the college experience produces.

Tell us about how your students reacted when you began making larger or more radical changes to the structure of your courses.

I implemented changes gradually, not all at once; the process was more incremental than it was radical. I also spent a good bit of time (in class and online) explaining the educational rationale behind the changes. Some students resisted; some were more open to the changes. By the end of the course, those on board with the changes far outnumbered those still resisting. Often students who understood the rationale behind the changes tried to persuade their colleagues.

What are some small changes that can be implemented more immediately and that can lead to bigger changes down the road?

I recommend that all faculty move toward learner-centered approaches gradually. I'm not big on conversion experiences for teachers. Too much change too fast is very hard to sustain. All sorts of small changes can be tried and used as test cases to see how the approach works. In my case, I started with having students make the end of session summaries. In the beginning don't expect the kind of erudite, eloquent summaries professors give. We've had lots of practice. Let students review their notes and underline what they think are the two or three key ideas from the session. Solicit a collection of those and see if there is some agreement.

Here's another example: have students do the exam review. Put them in groups and assign each group a content chunk. Have each group prepare five test questions (like whatever they think will be on the exam) and then have the groups answer each other's questions. The instructor can offer five of his or her sample questions and those questions can be compared with what the students are asking. Or, have each group prepare review materials on their assigned content chunk and then distribute them to students in the other groups. After the exam, have the groups assess those study review materials. Who most needs to learn how to assemble a good set of review materials? The teacher or the students?

Final example, give students an opportunity to generate some of the criteria that the instructor will use to assess participation in class. Ask them what makes participation interesting, informative and worth listening to in a class? Generating the criteria makes students much more aware of what's involved in robust, intellectual exchanges in class.

To the skeptic, what are some outcomes you can point to that might reassure those who are reluctant to make changes?

Learning outcomes, like students being more confident and self-directed learners. Learning outcomes, like students better able to apply and use what they've learned. Learning outcomes, like increased motivation, including greater likelihood that students will take another course in the discipline. Learning outcomes, like more responsible study strategies including better time management and an increased likelihood that students will interact with the instructor. All of these learning outcomes have been documented empirically.

What is more fun about teaching in a more learner-centered classroom?

What happens in the classroom is less scripted and more spontaneous, which makes teaching more interesting and challenging for the teacher. You are less sure about what's going to happen and so there are more surprises. To some teachers this probably doesn't sound like more "fun." Rather, it sounds "risky," which it is. With learner-centered teaching the stakes are higher. This is not a safer way to teach, but by mid career, a lot of faculty are ready for teaching that involves some risk taking.

These approaches also provide more opportunities to see students learning—to see them get it and to watch their confidence grow as a result of decisions they have made and actions they have taken. For years I felt good about myself as a teacher—I could lecture well, but when I started using more learner-centered approaches I got to see up close and personal how my teaching affected student efforts to learn. For me, that was thrilling in a different and more satisfying way.

Readers of Maryellen Weimer's book will find more examples of effective practices tied to the principles and concepts outlined above. ITLAL's "Two Guest Workshops with Maryellen Weimer" are designed to introduce faculty to these ideas in two entertaining and highly engaging sessions.

Biggs, John. Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does. Bristol, PA: Open University Press, 1999a.

Weimer, Maryellen. Learner-Centered Teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 2002.

Dr. Maryellen Weimer holds a Ph.D. in Speech Communication from Penn State University. She has consulted with over 450 colleges and universities on instructional issues and regularly keynotes national meetings and regional conferences. In addition to journal articles and book chapters, she is the author of *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice and Enhancing Scholarly Work on Teaching and Learning*. Currently she is finishing a book tentatively titled *Teaching Excellence: A Career Long Companion for College Faculty* and scheduled for publication late 2009.



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