

CTL Reading Group: TEACHING FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS

THIS PAST SUMMER the CTL initiated a new program: a faculty reading group. Established to facilitate faculty engagement with the literature on teaching and learning, it followed a simple format. The book was announced (via faculty listserv) at the end of the spring semester. Early in the summer books were delivered — compliments of the CTL — to those who responded. In the week before school started, the group met for three hours to enjoy lunch, discuss ideas gleaned from the book that seemed most applicable to their own classes, and to review one another's syllabi. In late October two follow-up meetings (offered to accommodate diverse teaching schedules) gave group members that chance to share what they were doing in class, trade "artifacts" (assignments, handouts, syllabi, etc.), and talk about what was working well and what needed refinement.

This year's book, *Teaching First-Year College Students* by Bette LaSere Erickson, Calvin B. Peters and Diane Weltner Strommer (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), was suggested by CTL Faculty Fellow Abby Van Slyck, who had reviewed the book for the last CTL newsletter. "I liked the book," she noted, "because one didn't have to read it cover to cover to get great concrete ideas about how to meet first-year students where they are, while challenging them to become the kind of advanced students we want to teach." The topic resonated with Connecticut College faculty, 23 of whom — from all academic divisions of the College — joined the group. The reading group format was a hit; faculty appreciated the chance to read and reflect over the summer and liked the way the book established a common ground among colleagues from different departments, allowing them to discuss in depth what they were doing in their classrooms that semester. The book, too, was



Ruth Grabn in class.

praised for providing a great number of specific, practical suggestions.

Here are some of the ideas from *Teaching First-Year College Students* that our colleagues adapted to their own classes.

PURBA MUKERJI, Economics 111: Introductory Macroeconomics

I used "structured controversy" to study government policy in the wake of the current U.S. financial crisis. The topic is very timely and students are keen to understand what is going on in the economy. It is also a rather involved



Purba Mukerji

topic and requires us to cover almost all material of the course before it can be discussed formally. The structured controversy provided the opportunity to discuss the topic in an intuitive way.

The procedure is to divide students into groups where each group is then subdivided into opposite sides of a controversy. In this case the controversy was whether the government's stimulus package was an appropriate policy to address the unemployment and slow down of growth in the U.S. economy. The discussion was based on two newspaper articles, one from the Wall Street Journal and the other from the New York Times. The two newspapers tend to belong to the two ends of the political spectrum and are offer opposing views of government policy. This provided a basis for some real-world economic analysis in the face of the usual propaganda dished out in popular media.

I tweaked the book's exercise in two ways, one successful and the other not. I told the groups that they would have to try to come to a consensus view at the end to share with the class. This was successful since it seemed to make them more analytical and less partial to

continued on page 4

First Year

continued from page 3

preconceived notions and prejudices. The second was to let them read the articles in class instead of assigning the readings to be done before class. I think this was a mistake, as it wasted precious class time. Nonetheless, the result was a very interesting class discussion and hands-on application of economic concepts.

RUTH GRAHN, Psychology 101: Psychology as a Natural Science

I teach PSY 101 on a regular basis and had two new, closely related goals for this offering of the course. First, I wanted students in the class to feel that their presence in each class was noticed. Second, I wanted to know everyone's name. In the CTL reading group on engaging first-year students, we discussed a number of strategies for giving students in a large class a personal experience. A few that I tried are described below.

First-day exercise: "Working with a group of students sitting nearby, make a list of issues that you believe a psychologist would find interesting. How might this person contribute to a better understanding of this issue?" Once the small groups had a list and some ideas, I asked a few groups to offer some examples of the issues they discussed. These were compiled on the board. We then examined a table from the textbook that described various types of psychologists. Most novice psychology students have "therapist" in mind when asked what a psychologist does, so this was an opportunity to expand the concept of psychologist. It also gave me a sense for what issues the students found interesting.

In order to make students feel less anonymous, I incorporated a series of in-class exercises that happened without prior notice. The exercises were not graded individually, although they provided the basis for awarding the class participation grade, which was 10 percent of the course grade. The exercises were risk-free expressions of what a student understood, serving as a signal both to me and to the student

about how well the material was being processed. Here are a few examples:

In-class exercise 1: "Draw the neurons in the withdrawal circuit, indicating for each one if it is a) afferent or efferent and b) sensory or motor." This exercise was done individually, and then each student worked with a neighbor, comparing drawings and using their notes to complete or correct elements of the question that they missed. We had a discussion about what parts were most challenging and clarified those. Then they were instructed to circle the portion of the drawing that they did correctly on their own and turn it in. This gave me a sense for how well they were able to express their understanding of the circuit, and it was another opportunity to have a discussion.

In-class exercise 2: Students were instructed that as they were learning material for Exam 3 they should make up a few multiple-choice questions that would demonstrate their understanding of the material on an exam. They were instructed to bring these to class. On the day they brought their questions to class, I instructed them to pass their questions to another student, who then answered the questions and turned them in. After looking them over, I chose five questions that I thought were worthy of an exam question, and we looked at those together during the next class.

The goal of each activity was to deconstruct the anonymity of the large class. I feel that this objective was partly met. Even though I did not get to know all 92 of my students by name, I am confident that I'll get closer to fully achieving that goal by incorporating a few more of these activities next time I teach the class.

ANDREA LANOUX, FYS 140I: Russia After Communism

What's in a Grade? In *Teaching First-Year College Students*, Erickson, Peters and Strommer emphasize the importance of clearly expressing expectations to students and of illustrating points through specific examples (93, 168). Inspired by these suggestions, I decided to try fully

transparent grading in my first-year seminar in fall 2010. In connection with students' first writing assignment, I handed out a list of criteria that I use in grading student essays — i.e., what a grade of A, B, C, etc. means in my system of evaluation, and what an essay that earns a given letter grade accomplishes (or not) in its form and content. I then asked students whether they would be willing to have me post electronic versions of their graded essays (without attribution) to the course Moodle site so that all students could see them. They all agreed.

This exercise ended up being a productive and interesting experiment not only for students, but also for me as the person whose grades were to be "made public." I discovered that it is one thing to grade and comment on student essays individually, and quite another to articulate in writing to an



Andrea Lanoux

entire class why and how, for example, a B essay meets the stated evaluation criteria (given the countless flavors of "B essay.") In other words, this experiment made my grading more conscious and explicit — and I hope useful to students. Most students ended up reading at least some of their peers' essays online, and they reported that the experience was very instructive. I was somewhat surprised that no students questioned my grading system, either on those or subsequent essays. Clearly, this is just one possible way to "take the mystery out of grading," but one that I found worthwhile and worth repeating in future courses.

The CTL plans to sponsor another reading group this summer. Watch your e-mail for the invitation to participate.