

Murray State Teaching Chronicles

Connecting the Teaching Community at Murray State University

2006 • Edition 2

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Teaching Chronicles Highlights

by Linda Miller, Director Center for Teaching, Learning & Technology (Murray State University)

I am pleased to share with you a new year of the Murray State Teaching Chronicles. The Teaching Chronicles provide an opportunity for Murray State faculty to share insights, musings and teaching philosophy with the campus community and the world at large.

They were conceived by Dr. Ricky Cox during his year as CTLT Teaching Scholar-in-Residence. He has continued to serve as editor for the 2006/2007 academic year.

The premise of the Chronicles is that the active consideration of the profession is an important element in the scholarship of teaching. We all benefit from the exchange of perspectives, philosophies and strategies that are shared here. I'd like to thank our contributors to this edition, and encourage others on campus to participate.



You can find the series of Murray State Teaching Chronicles online at <http://racernet.murraystate.edu/mstc/>



The Red Ink Corner

by J. Ricky Cox, Department of Chemistry, 2005–06 CTLT Teaching Scholar-in-Residence

Welcome to this edition of the *Murray State Teaching Chronicles* (MS/TC), a campus-wide publication that is focused on issues associated with teaching and learning. In this edition, we have two excellent articles by Murray State faculty members and a recap of selected sessions at the 9th Annual Teaching and Technology Forum. In case you missed these sessions, links are provided in this edition to webcasts of the presentations.

The annual Teaching and Technology Forum and the MS/TC are dedicated to improving teaching and learning across campus. They are also outlets for faculty members to express their opinions on current issues associated with teaching in the academy.

Whether it be within or across disciplines, open and honest discussion about educating students and disseminating knowledge are vital to meeting our university goals. I truly enjoy talking to and learning from faculty outside my own discipline about effective teaching practices. Although there may be disciplinary styles of teaching, I am convinced that we can learn a great deal from each other. With this in mind, I hope that the MS/TC can serve at least a small role in connecting faculty across campus. I hope that each of you will consider writing an article for the MS/TC and help build a community of faculty members that are not only excellent teachers but also contribute to teaching excellence across campus and the academy.

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CTLT's 9th Annual Teaching & Technology Forum - Session Recordings Available Online



CTLT hosted its 9th annual Teaching and Technology Forum on Murray State's campus during September 14–15, 2006. The theme for this year's forum was "The Artisanship of Teaching: Polishing the Tools of the Profession". During the two-day event, a portion of the sessions were led by CTLT's current or past Teaching Scholars-in-Residence: Dr. Joy Navan, Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership and Counseling; Dr. Ricky Cox, Associate Professor, Chemistry; and Dr. Sue Sroda, Associate Professor of English, Graduate Coordinator of TESOL.

Three of the sessions have been video recorded and are now available online. You will find session descriptions and links to the videos in this article. We would like to welcome you to either view these sessions for the first time or to revisit the thought-provoking discussions. We hope that the discussions will continue across campus.

For additional session descriptions from this year's forum and bios of our Teaching Scholars-in-Residence, please visit our forum website at <http://campus.murraystate.edu/forum06/>

The Artisan's Notebook: the Simplicity Behind the Complex

Presented by Dr. Sue Sroda

During the session titled *The Artisan's Notebook*, Dr. Sue Sroda examined issues of teachers and teaching using the metaphor of artisanship. With examples of how the term "artisan" has changed in meaning over the years, Dr. Sroda addressed questions such as: How do we maintain excellence in our "craft" when the contexts and tools are changing? What can we learn about our own decision-making processes by analyzing our own expertise?

To view the video recording of *The Artisan's Notebook: the Simplicity behind the Complex*, please visit <http://campus.murraystate.edu/media/ctlr/forum/2006/notebook.htm>

Have the Tools of Technology Improved Teaching and Learning? Definitely, Maybe... Come See the Data

Presented by Dr. Ricky Cox

Instructional technologies have changed the teaching/learning landscape in higher education. There is no doubt that technology has fundamentally changed the way some faculty members teach their courses and interact with students. During the session titled *Have the Tools of Teaching Improved Teaching and Learning?* Dr. Ricky Cox presented data from the Educause Center for Applied Research and the Tablet PC program at Murray State to address the question of whether instructional technologies have actually improved teaching and learning.

To view the video recording of *Have the Tools of Teaching Improved Teaching and Learning?* please visit <http://campus.murraystate.edu/media/ctlr/forum/2006/tools.htm>

Content Vs. Cognitive Skills: A Friendly Debate

Facilitated by Dr. Sue Sroda

This session used a moderated debate-style format to discuss the role of content and cognition (critical thinking, etc.) in higher education. Some have heralded a shift away from content toward cognition, while others still want students to have a significant knowledge base. Participants discussed both sides in order to suggest the proper balance in our classrooms.

To view the video recording of *A Friendly Debate*, please visit <http://campus.murraystate.edu/media/ctlr/forum/2006/debate.html>



The “New Student” Reform Movement and Institutional Change: Devaluing the Degree?

by James LaValle, Associate Professor, Sociology

The value of a college degree is largely a function of the level of prestige enjoyed by the issuing university, which is formally measured (e.g., variously published university subject rankings) and subjectively perceived (i.e., “So, from *where* did you earn your degree?”) by its academic standards. Those standards are produced, established and sustained as much by the working professionalism of faculty and the admission requirements of the University as by the intellectual capabilities, collective predisposition (to the extent there is such a thing) and academic commitments of students.

True, ‘learning styles’ vary considerably among students as do ‘teaching styles’ among faculty, and the traditional / reading / lecture / discussion / exam / paper format is considered by some to be antiquated and “inflexible,” but to accept a revisionist philosophy of pedagogic relativism as a “solution” merely on pragmatic grounds without at least a modicum of professional, intellectual and academic conservatism is inherently threatening to the University, and resistance to such should not be confused with “elitism.”

American universities unambiguously work to afford students equal opportunity (albeit imperfectly), but they should not even attempt to insure perfectly equal educational attainment regardless of students’ intellectual capabilities or commitment to academic obligations and responsibilities. GPA “matters,” degree-level matters and so, too, does the prestige accorded the issuing University as reflected in its academic exclusivity, its academic rigor and its essentially uniform performance standards—rightfully so.

Without an appropriate level of academic rigor combined with un-obscured recognition of the need for a measure of course and degree performance requirement standardization, the

academy is in jeopardy of transforming into something it was never meant to be and should never become—an institution where course or degree requirements are counter-productively individualized, and actual degrees are purchased rather than earned. Moreover, tuition should not buy a social contract—implied or “official”—guaranteeing or even suggesting that course or degree performance requirements are somehow negotiable or contingent upon the student’s individual limitations (extreme personal circumstance or clinically verifiable learning disabilities notwithstanding).

American universities are fortunately still considered by many to be some of the finest in the world, thus we should not marginalize the institutional canons, guiding principles, upon which that lofty status has been attained in a conciliatory

effort to conform to the indisputably lesser academic standards of our primary and secondary academies; rather, they should at least attempt to raise their academic standards substantially closer to the level of our universities, lest the American University travel the *same failed road* as American public primary and secondary education—mass-produced equality in mediocrity, or worse.

A college degree should indicate significant qualities about its holder—both personal and intellectual—well beyond that which

secondary education designates, not merely confirm a ceremonial extension of it administratively. Students are generally capable of making the admittedly difficult personal adjustments and subsequently taking the intellectually forward steps necessary to succeed in academically rigorous environments, but only as long they are respectfully but firmly required to do so.

“Without an appropriate level of academic rigor combined with un-obscured recognition of the need for a measure of course and degree performance requirement standardization, the academy is in jeopardy of transforming into something it was never meant to be and should never become...”

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To be sure, we should collectively hold that college is *not* appropriate for everybody, but for almost everybody who is willing and able to do that which is rightly valued and academically required to preserve the University standards which pre-eminently imbue a college degree with its vitally important social and professional value. Who among us, after all, should be willing to permanently abandon the concept of what it means to *actually accomplish in spite of our individual limitations*? Similarly, are accomplishments truly significant if we achieve them without first overcoming our various “limitations”? I know mine aren’t.

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Do You Elluminate?

CTLT is conducting a pilot program this year on a new tool used for web conferencing and distance education. Elluminate Live!® is a real-time virtual classroom environment designed for distance education and collaboration in academic institutions.

Instructors have used Elluminate Live to hold virtual office hours, review sessions, and even lectures! Elluminate provides instructors with the tools to conduct real-time chat discussions (via text or audio), share personal desktops and applications, annotate PowerPoint presentations, perform quick polls and quizzes, use a whiteboard, and more! Sessions can also be recorded and archived for later viewing.

If you are interested in learning more about Elluminate and hosting an Elluminate session, please contact CTLT at 809-2535. For more information, visit <http://racernet.murraystate.edu/elluminate/quickstart.htm>





The Use of Modern Cinema and Student Role Playing In Higher Education

by John Dillon, Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

As an instructional tool, Hollywood film has been successfully deployed at the high school and college level for several decades. It has been used to facilitate learning, most especially in the academic area of history (Weinstein, 2001), but also as a bridge to understanding precepts of religion (Rowe, 2004); American law (Machura & Ulbrich, 2001); social work and counseling (Downey et al., 2003; Toman & Rak, 2000); psychology (Hemenover et al., 1999); philosophy (Asma, 1999); and a near-universal range of other areas from “current events” to human physiology.

In the words of a physics teacher who asked her students to analyze the attributes of atmospheric pressurization after screening portions of the movie *Apollo 13*, “You have to be creative, patient.... And just throwing a video in to take up (class) time I think is totally wrong” (Amiot, 2005).

On the simplest level, entertainment film provides models for examination. Because cinema is an accessible and popular medium for young people, it is feasible to suggest that education could be enhanced by assigning students to study the images of professionals in contemporary cinema (Good, 1989).

David Kolb (1984, p. 38) in his theory of experiential learning, identifies a process “whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.” This “transferal” method frames learning as a four-stage cycle: The feeling dimension of concrete experience (CE); the watching dimension, resulting in reflective observation (RO); the thinking dimension of abstract conceptualization (AC); and the “doing” dimension of active experimentation (AE).

It is here argued that the watching and thinking dimensions of cinema—tied to collaborative classroom experiences (such as discussion or student role-playing of characters from the movie)—can be successfully woven into the curriculum to achieve, if not a *fully experiential* instrument, at least a *quasi-experiential* one. That would be a model lacking full implementation of Kolb’s concrete experience (CE) and active

experimentation (AE) levels, but making good use of the thinking and abstract conceptualization (AC) level, as well as reflective observation (RO).

On Critical Learning and Quasi-Experiences of Role-Playing

“Role playing” in the instructional environment may take the form of simulation and gaming, where a student is presented with a simplified reproduction of the world “or part of a real or imaginary world... which incorporates the material to be learned” (van Ments, 1989, p. 14). We are again focusing upon the parallel component variables of “thinking; abstract conceptualization; and reflective observation.”

“Film matters.”

– Stephen Bach, film producer / executive

Importantly, conceptual role-playing for students could assist the efforts of individuals who wish to adopt the values of “a group to which they aspire but do not yet belong,” meaning that professionals-in-training might

benefit by televisual education to help them “make believe the part” (Merton, 1966). This socialization factor forges links with professional reference groups, and may induce the learner to confront matters of group affiliation within a profession, such as ethical behaviors and standards and practices.

Role-playing is about the display of “genuine on-going social situations,” and includes depictions of conformity while at the same time not discouraging ideologies outside the norm (Thomas & Biddle, 1966, p. 17). It may provide a basis for development of values for individuals training in social-provision careers, such as journalism, education or health.

Role-playing allows an exercise of professionalism, while at the same time preserving the enjoyment of gaming (Shaftel & Shaftel, 1967, p. 9). The gaming approach stresses strategies of interactive negotiation with a real or fictitious stimulus to achieve problem-solving, and fits squarely with new technologies and video, which are capable of highly evolved

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learning experiences (Cameron, 2001). Such training makes good use of these simulations as hypotheticals.

Students' critical thinking skills may also be served by film pedagogy. Critical thinking skills, in the words of Potter (1998, p. 75), can help to combat the belief in "false predictors" of reality which so often resonate in popular culture. By presenting experiences which are parallel to real-life, cinema may hone critical thinking skills among students (Anderson, 1992).

In the words of communication professor S.L. Harrison (2001, p. 86), "No matter how effective your lectures might be, today's undergraduate audience demands more.... their generation was weaned on the box and they are more aware of events portrayed pictorially."

Portions of films can be shown in a classroom setting; the entire movie may be played; or selected clips from a cluster of films may be drawn from. All would seem to provide opportunities to cultivate thinking and abstract conceptualization (AC), as well as reflective observation (RO). These could be denoted as *quasi-experiential learning tools*.

To deploy this tactic, an educator should pre-screen a film and identify anywhere from one to four key characters, most commonly to include the main protagonist (driving action forward) and antagonist (opposing this person's ideas or actions). Let the class know that "this isn't a time for popcorn, it's a time for thinking and make-believe." Allow students to take basic notes about the theme of the film, the plot, and in what ways the film suggests important concepts. The Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com>) is especially helpful in outlining some of these details, and it is a treasure-trove of information about both Hollywood cinema and many made-for-television films.

The educator has a choice of assigning several students to "play" the same character, or may assign the same character to several students, but all important characters should be assigned to at least one person.

The film can be viewed in whole or in part, in most cases covered by Fair Use provisions of the law. ("This doctrine has at its core a fundamental belief that not all [uses of copyrighted material] should be banned, particularly in socially important endeavors such as criticism, news reporting, teaching, and research," according to Bitlaw Information [2006]).

After screening the film or film segment, the instructor can begin immediate role-playing activities, or can assign a short paper to each student who has been assigned a character to play. The advantage of assigning a paper or a posting on a discussion board is to allow students the opportunity to

reflect on issues (Kolb's "reflective observation" level). They should reflect on questions such as, "What motivates my character?" and "What strengths and weaknesses does my character demonstrate—on the professional level, and

on the personal level?" Other pivotal questions include the appropriateness of the character's actions; the types of emotional values that the character displays; and a host of diverse issues from ethnic stereotyping to historical context, depending on the film.

Lastly, let the students play out a portion of the plot in class, with the instructor leading the discussion. Taking as an example the 1981 journalism classic, *Absence of Malice*, starring Sally Field as an over-eager reporter, and Paul Newman as a news source that she gets into trouble: "Why did Megan, played by Sally Field, feel compelled to write the story she did? Was she displaying 'fairness'? Was Michael

"Let the class know that this isn't a time for popcorn, it's a time for thinking and make-believe. Allow students to take basic notes about the theme of the film, the plot, and in what ways the film suggests important concepts."

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Gallagher— played by Paul Newman—correct in his criticism that ‘the story she wrote was accurate but untrue?’ What does that mean?”

Students especially enjoy “the dirt” on characters: “You are Megan, the reporter. Should you have gotten romantically involved with a man you were writing a news story about?” And so forth.

Conclusion

Shneiderman et al. (1998) assert that “collaborative teaching” (sharing of information and perspective, rather than mere lecture) is a worthy goal in the classroom. It so happens that role-playing and situation analyses as suggested in the present paper would well-serve that goal—to inspire small-group interaction or classroom-wide involvement.

Indeed, the use of cinema is both an accessible and valuable venue for learning. The use of broadband technology, devices such as video iPods, and video-on-demand will continue to unlock the potential of video-enabled education in the 21st Century. It may not be *fully* experiential learning for students, but it can certainly assist *quasi-experiential* understanding.

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