



The Best Part of Waking Them Up...

Critical Thinking and Active Learning Are More than Buzz Words

Professors are always looking for more effective methods of engaging their students. After all, concluding that a student is unteachable, or is simply what teaching professionals might call a hard case, is on some level admitting that their instructional skills were not up to the particular challenges that this student presented. All we need do is drop in on some of the “locker room” banter about students that can be heard in faculty lounges; even the most jaded of university professors is truly bothered by those students who simply cannot be motivated. Perhaps these professors are capable of the type of negative capability that often defines good teachers—being able to project themselves into their students shoes and understand some of the hurdles that frustrate. After all, nothing zaps motivation and enthusiasm faster than the sinking feeling that one is, well, sinking. These professors may also be attuned to the psychological states of their unmotivated students, realizing that, for example, one of the factors that makes these students “lazy” is their desire to be treated as individuals, even while in a crowd of classmates. But understanding these issues does not necessarily mean that one has the knowledge required to address and attack the motivation problem.

One method of engaging unmotivated students is by employing the mechanics of active learning. Simply stated, active learning is more student oriented than the typical expert lecturer teaching model, and as such, it provides one possibility for individualizing the learning experience, even in large enrollment classes. When students learn actively, they spend as much of their time solving problems, answering questions, formulating questions of their own, as well as discussing and debating, as they do passively listening to a lecture. They are made part of the learning process itself by being placed in cooperative learning teams, where they have to rely on their own mental capabilities in order to work on problems and projects. They develop both short-term mastery of the issue at hand and long-term retention of the principles involved in becoming experts in their disciplines, using critical thinking skills. Imagine what a confidence booster it is for a student to be part of a small group that solves a complex problem in the field in which that student hopes to some day excel.

It is not difficult to master using active learning techniques in the classroom. A little research will reveal that various models have been tested, and that these models can usually be applied across the disciplines, so that both the art and the computer science professor can find ways to adapt them. One such model is the dialogue. This model lends itself to all learning experience, as its components are not only simple, but also intrinsically built into the human condition. In such a model, the two main kinds of dialogue are "Dialogue with Self" and "Dialogue with Others." An interior dialogue would involve deconstructing how one acquires knowledge, and a unit such as journal writing could reify such dialogue for the student. Exterior dialogues would enable students to learn from their peers, who they in turn would have to teach (depending on what expertise each student brings to a dialogue), rather than being fed answers. The result is that students come away not only knowing that a problem was solved, but having experienced how it was solved, and the principles are internalized.

The skills that a student would hone in such an environment would be those of the type identified by Paul, Binker, Jensen, and Kreklau (1990) in their list of 35 dimensions of critical thought. For example, certain active learning processes could lead to achieving the affective strategies skill sets, such as thinking independently, developing insight into egocentricity or sociocentricity, exercising fairmindedness, exploring thoughts underlying feelings and feelings underlying thoughts, developing intellectual humility and suspending judgment, developing intellectual courage, developing intellectual good faith or integrity, developing intellectual perseverance, and developing confidence in reason.

The Student Engagement Subcommittee has put together an impressive roster of faculty and students, including R. Allen Alexander (Chair, Director of Retention and Advisor Training and Assessment, University College and Associate Professor, Languages and Literature); Carol Blanchard (Assistant Dean, University College, Head, University Studies, and Director, Academic Advising Center); Susan Gilbert (Director of Tutorial and Academic Enhancement Center); Marlene Shaffer (Assistant Head, University Studies); Steve Triche, (Assistant Professor, Education); Bruce McManis (Professor, Finance and Head, Economics and Finance); Cheryl Franklin (Assistant Dean, Nursing and Allied Health and Associate Professor, Nursing); Anne Parr (Assistant Dean and Assistant Professor, Culinary); Glenn Lo (Assistant Dean, Arts and Sciences and Associate Professor, Physical Sciences); Nicki Boudreaux (Instructor, Mass Communications); Michele Caruso (Dean of Student Services); Judy Daniels (Dean of Student Life); Courtney Cassard (Director of Enrollment Services); and Olinda Ricard (President, Student Government Association). In addition, one other student representative will be appointed by the SGA.

Pull Up a Table at the CAFÉ

Once again we found ourselves occupying the big round table at the Coffee Table. Ray was in one of his usual serious moods. Tony and Anita were admiring Anne's uniform shirt, envying the sleeve pockets and wondering if they could manage to sew one on themselves and whether or not such a bold fashion statement would fly in Thibodaux. Stephen and Anita were talking diets and the hazards of making bets with people, while Connie bemusedly sipped her dose of caffeine.

In the meantime, the members of the Faculty Development Subcommittee managed to create a tentative Fall schedule which included brown bag seminar sessions, a two-day Critical Thinking discussion panel, a webinar, and (fingers crossed) a Grand Opening Gala where the much talked about CAFÉ in Elkins Hall would be unveiled.

The primary goal of the subcommittee this semester is to begin the furnishing and redecorating of the CAFE itself. The subcommittee envisions the room as being a clean, well-lighted, and comfortable place where faculty from all disciplines can feel welcome to simply walk in, grab a cup of joe, and peruse the satellite library's collection of New Directions in Higher Learning titles, or perhaps the latest issue of The Journal of Faculty Development, all the while settling into a relaxing chair and possibly sharing teaching ideas with other faculty members who may happen to be in the CAFÉ at the time. Aside from containing the physical Faculty Development Satellite Library, the CAFÉ will also house a couple of wireless laptops or desktops, which will make it possible for faculty to search the library's databases for possible full-text articles, or whet their curiosity by looking at the Nicholls Faculty Development webpage. Of course, those faculty members who are simply looking for a place to collect their thoughts or those hoping to find a safe abode in which they can "reboot" their overworked cranial hard drives by admiring the donated paintings or enjoying the view of the quad will find themselves welcome.

Nonetheless, we realize that Faculty Development goes beyond dedicating a physical space, so while the CAFÉ is under construction, Ray and the Rayettes will be hosting intimate, seminar-type brown bag sessions in the seminar room located directly across from the CAFÉ. The subcommittee has identified three topics for the Fall: Waking Students Up in a 7:30 Class, Incorporating Spirituality in Teaching, and Creating a Safe Space in the Classroom for Dissent. Anne Parr and Stephen Triche have volunteered to serve as facilitators, and the subcommittee is attempting to bring in an LSU faculty member as an outside lecturer for one of the sessions. These brown bags will be announced as they are closer to fruition, so keep your eyes open for emails from Ray Giguette or Tony Fonseca. They will also be asking for ideas for future sessions, as well as for future facilitators.

The subcommittee will also look into the feasibility of hosting a rolling Tuesday-Wednesday panel, sometime after midterms, so that interested faculty can meet on a larger scale in order to discuss issues such as faculty and staff development (and what manifestations this can take at Nicholls) or the uses of critical thinking across the curriculum. This will give Mathematics professors and Art professors, for example, a forum in which they together can explore the possibilities of applying such nebulous concepts as "thinking critically" or "engaging students in active learning" in their own classrooms.

The hope of the Faculty Development Subcommittee is to help create a sense of community and ownership among NSU faculty. After all, a university is not just a series of rooms and labs. It can be a dynamic and vibrant entity only if its human resources start with a vision, develop a plan, and work together to make change happen.

QEP Subcommittee Reports

The Critical Thinking through Writing Subcommittee will begin the semester with a call for volunteers to implement the rubric in freshman English composition classes. These faculty will receive a \$500.00 stipend for participating in the training and implementation of the rubric. The volunteers will design a rubric geared specifically for Nicholls State based on the Washington State rubric. Dr. Gary Brown from Washington State will provide training for the implementation in mid October. Brown will facilitate training sessions on two consecutive afternoons, using a web-based platform. The subcommittee will schedule subsequent training sessions. —**Keri Turner, Chair**

The Faculty Development Subcommittee will—at some point in the not-so-distant future—host the grand opening of the Nicholls CAFÉ (The Center for Advancing Faculty Engagement). This all-day all-night monster party will likely feature hundreds of prizes, ranging from tee shirts imprinted with the Nicholls Alma Mater to a fully equipped 2007 Dodge Viper. A few small "infoworkinars" are also planned, which will attract faculty from all over campus, and from as far away as Luling and Cut Off. But we must first refurbish CAFÉ headquarters in Elkins (located between Jerry Sanders' office and the pile of debris by the elevator). The room still needs a little paint, a few chairs, one or two windows, and at least one door that locks without having to jiggle the key in a sort of clockwise motion. We don't want to wake up Jerry. —**Ray Giguette, Chair**

The Student Engagement Subcommittee has met twice since SACS and plans to meet monthly. It is reviewing implementation of QEP initiatives as well as addressing additional issues related to student engagement, such as Freshman Institute. The process of student engagement has begun in earnest as students in University Studies classes have been completing LASSI pre-tests, after which they will meet with University Studies instructors (who also serve as their official advisors) to review the results. At conclusion of the semester, students will complete LASSI post-tests. The subcommittee has also begun the process of designing the mechanism whereby near mid-term, University Studies students will complete the ACT Discover Career Planning Program. University Studies students will also complete a career-oriented writing assignment that will require them to demonstrate both writing and critical thinking skills. This assignment caps a semester-long emphasis on career exploration and planning. Finally, the subcommittee will be developing the Student Engagement Center this semester. —**R. Allen Alexander, Chair**

If you are interested in serving on the Faculty Development Subcommittee, contact either Ray Giguette or Tony Fonseca. The current members are Giguette (chair) and Fonseca (his man Friday), along with Anita Tully and Connie Siros from English, Stephen Triche from Education, Anne Parr from Culinary, Lori Soule from Computer Science, and Sherry Rodrigue from Computing. The subcommittee is particularly interested in having faculty from nursing and one of the hard sciences become involved. Come help make the Café what you envision it to be.

Newsletter staff: Tony Fonseca, Managing Editor; Chris Rachal, Editor; R. Allen Alexander, Editor; Windy Rachal, Design Consultant. The statements and opinions included in these pages are those of the newsletter staff only. Any statements and opinions are not those of Nicholls State University or the University of Louisiana System.