



Student Engagement? That's Hot.

On October 15th, the CAFÉ will once again co-host a symposium on Teaching Engaged Learning, with the theme of this year's conference being Engaging Students Through Popular Culture. The day-long event will focus on how faculty can move beyond teaching just the facts and impart to their students the thinking skills that will help them to become critical thinkers and independent learners, by offering ideas on how to create an atmosphere of engagement through active learning practices.

The premise is simple: One of the most effective methods of engaging students is to communicate with them in their own language, thereby incorporating their worldviews into the knowledge base that is the core of a subject or lesson. By understanding our students' knowledge base, informed by a technologically dependent, fast-paced instant information society filled with an ever-growing number of popular culture icons, educators can figure ways to incorporate students' everyday knowledge into the classroom experience.

Last year's symposium was a success, drawing over 90 participants. Six universities statewide were represented, along with three high school systems. A multidisciplinary event, it drew interest from Nicholls administrators, faculty, staff, and students, all of whom enjoyed presentations on technology-based learning, teaching experiences, learning and teaching styles, and perspectives on today's students. Some of the cultural issues discussed included music, dance techniques, art, counterculture experiences, and assimilation issues faced by international students. Presentation topics included the use of Youtube in the classroom, wireless student response systems, designing interesting and relevant writing assignments, teaching French to today's students, making information literacy exciting, dealing with gender issues, understanding different "mindsets," engaging freshmen, and advising sophomores. Many sessions included student respondents.

Director of the CAFÉ, Ray Giguette (Computer Science and Mathematics), along with Tony Fonseca (Serials Librarian), and Melissa Goldsmith (Reference Librarian) again lead the organizing committee, and they will be working with the Nicholls' Student Government Association to make this year's event a success. Presentation schedules will be available in September. Faculty and staff interested in volunteering as session chairs should contact Fonseca, and anyone interested in attending can pre-register by emailing tony.fonseca@nicholls.edu. There is no fee.

Student organizations and individual students are also welcome to submit ideas for poster sessions to Goldsmith (melissa.goldsmith@nicholls.edu) by Friday, Sept. 26, 2008.

With some 20 presentations planned, this year's symposium topics will address pop culture issues across all disciplines and fields. Presentation topics slated for October include movie physics; hip-hop dance; text messaging; sports statistics; *Rolling Stone*, *Nylon*, and other music magazines; advertising/consumerism; e-Bay and Youtube; virtual communities, the movie *Fight Club*; and the serial television cartoon *The Boondocks*. In addition, incorporated into the symposium will be a special Master Advisors' workshop on student generational differences. Many sessions will also include student respondents.

While most presenters will be Nicholls faculty, four other institutions of higher education will be represented on the program: LSU, ULL, ULM, and Northwestern State. Faculty from the Lafourche, St. Mary, and Terrebonne Parish school systems have also been invited to attend this unique faculty development opportunity, and Nicholls faculty are encouraged to allow their students to attend sessions. For more information and for updates, consult the Symposium website: http://www.nicholls.edu/library/symposium/symposium_main2008.htm.

Father Guido, Critical Thinking and FPCs

The scholars behind the critical thinking movement offer one excellent model for teaching: the idea of concept based education. Of particular interest is Gerald M. Nosich's theory of educating through Fundamental and Powerful Concepts. Building on the theories of critical thinking gurus Richard Paul and Linda Elder, Nosich argues that the human mind processes and internalizes in terms of concepts, a type of learning that harkens back to the theories of Jerome Bruner, who defined concept attainment as being "the search for and listing of attributes that can be used to distinguish exemplars from non exemplars of various categories."

The theory of Fundamental and Powerful Concepts argues that the human mind naturally categorizes and classifies in its attempt to understand the world, that humans process information not by rote memorization, but by understanding the abstract concepts that make up the core of information sets, specifically by seeking out common and relevant features between sets, groups, or categories, and by differentiating these concept-relevant features from those at the core of information which do not contain the same concept-relevant features. To put it simply, a learner classifies by observing example objects, along with their class labels, and then simplifies what has been observed and applies this new information to future examples.

Nosich ties this to critical thinking theory by expressing discipline based education as involving learning to think logically, in terms of concepts, in a particular field. The theory assumes that a discipline is not a collection of isolated, unrelated facts. It is a system of interrelated meanings and a logic that presupposes critical thinking based on those meanings. For example, a discipline like biology can be expressed and taught as "critical thinking applied to living systems." Or to put it another way, all courses are informed by the interrelated issues of their parent discipline or field, and each field or discipline is informed by a central question. In *Learning to Think Things Through*, Nosich uses the metaphor of the mission statement to explain this concept. In essence, disciplines and courses are organized according to what Paul and Elder call "Forms of Thought." This would take into account a discipline's goals, questions, concepts, information, point of view, assumptions, conclusions, and implications. In these terms, a fundamental and powerful concept would be one that explains a huge body of questions, problems, information, and situations, by offering an approach to processing information, much like a concept map.

Those of us familiar with Guido Sarducci's comic routine called The Five Minute University will grasp quickly the usefulness of fundamental and powerful concepts. In this routine, Don Novello as Sarducci astutely points out that in five minutes, it's possible to teach someone as much as the average student will retain after five years of college. The sad truth behind this joke is that in some courses, especially in those associated with the Freshman Year Experience, students are so inundated with bits of information that they retain almost none of it after just a few years. This occurs because rather than being taught how to think about their discipline, how to reason in their discipline, and how to figure out answers to questions raised in their discipline, students are taught facts—in some cases thousands of them. The brain simply cannot retain so much raw and unorganized information. In the fundamental and powerful concept model of learning, which is closely allied with the critical thinking movement, students are made more information literate. Much of the curriculum is dedicated to problem-solving, decision-making, and exploration. The expert model of teaching is removed from center stage, and used only when in the best interest of students. And both faculty and students develop an expertise at information navigation, since independent thinking, based on solid research, is encouraged.

If you are interested in serving on the Faculty Development Committee, contact Tony Fonseca. The current members are Giguette (chair) and Fonseca (his man Friday), along with Anita Tully and Connie Sirois (English), Anne Parr (Culinary), Melissa Goldsmith (Ellender Library), Lori Soule (Math and Computer Science), Sherry Rodrigue (Academic Computing), Lloyd Chiasson (Mass Comm), Claire Bourgeois (Allied Health), and Norman Norris (Education). The subcommittee is particularly interested in having faculty from nursing and one of the hard sciences become involved. Come help make the CAFE what you envision it to be.

Symposium FAQ 1

Do participants have to Pre-register?

Pre-registration is optional, but is strongly encouraged. The advantages are doing so include guaranteeing yourself an official program and packet, making it possible for event organizers to contact you in case of last minute changes, avoiding the hassle of having to fill out registration information on-site, and guaranteeing that we have enough food and refreshments (so you get fed). Packets, including official programs, will be sent to audience participants as they register. If you would like to pre-register, contact Tony Fonseca: tony.fonseca@nicholls.edu.

Symposium FAQ 2 & 3

Can I register on-site?

On-site registration will be held between 7:30 and 8:30 in the CAFÉ. If you simply want to attend one or two sessions, you may choose to register on site.

Is there a fee?

The symposium is FREE.

Newsletter staff: Tony Fonseca, Managing Editor; Ray Giguette, Editor; Melissa Goldsmith, Editor. 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.