The Working Group on Active Teaching and Learning
University of Oregon

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The Working Group on Active Teaching and Learning is an annual course-revision cohort hosted by the Teaching Effectiveness Program, (TEP), the UO Libraries Center for Media and Educational Technologies (CMET), and the Yamada Language Center. Faculty members apply to enhance the creativity, interactivity, rigor, and skill building in a single course in keeping with research on how people learn. In brief: research on teaching and learning indicates that active classes that ask students to grapple with authentic problems and questions, give prompt facilitative feedback, and align assignments and activities tightly and transparently with faculty goals have the potential to increase student learning. But how do we achieve this as individual faculty members—especially considering the particular strengths and challenges of our disciplines, classrooms, and students? The group seeks to provide an intriguing and supportive framework to help each participant find compelling answers to this question.

Each year, sixteen faculty members from across the curriculum who would like space, support, and camaraderie as they experiment with their courses, perhaps shifting some lecture time to participatory activities designed to boost critical thinking; or building peer-learning frameworks to enhance students' sense of ownership of course material; or exploring what technology can do to enliven the classroom and serve as a vehicle for class interaction and creative production. We work with all the group's members to find strategies that address both common and unique learning outcomes in the wide range of disciplines represented.

Our activities include small-group brainstorming sessions, cohort participation in TEP's regular event series, a three-day intense workshop in June, posts of ideas and revised course materials to the group's private blog, and ongoing monthly luncheons. Participants receive a $1,000 stipend thanks to the generosity of Academic Affairs, the College of Arts and Sciences, and Undergraduate Studies. In two years of application cycles, we've drawn 67 outstanding applicants from every rank and more than two-dozen different departments.

The working group idea was inspired by the UO Steelcase LearnLab Pilot Project, which has built several technology-rich, pod-style classrooms on campus. The flexible arrangement of these learning spaces fosters student participation and collaboration. Faculty teaching in the first UO LearnLab during Fall 2013 remarked that they were able to better engage their students than in a traditional classroom thanks to the team-based classroom layout, upgraded furniture designed to support group work, and innovative audio-visual design and technologies. The Working Group explores the kinds of teaching that are possible in these active-learning spaces and, more broadly, what sophisticated, active pedagogies can look like in every classroom and lecture hall on campus.

These innovative faculty participants serve as mentors and models of best practices in active teaching and learning. Taken together, their body of work serves not only to inspire other faculty and GTFs but also to inform the design of campus learning spaces, influencing the campus and virtual environment for future UO instructors and students.
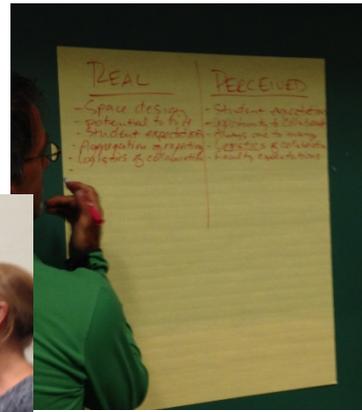
Outcomes and Accomplishments from the 2014 cohort

Alex Dracobly, who was a panelist for the kick-off "This Small, Teach Big" event on the changing function and pedagogical reputation of "the lecture," has revised his War and the Modern World to tightly knit assignments to his learning objectives--we worked as a group on backward design, or writing learning objectives and aligning them to class activities and assessments. Alex created his own "primary source tool kit" based on a "poem kit" Karen Ford in English developed and allowed us to show the group. Ultimately, Alex has created assignments that explicitly develop skills and build on one another; he also has used more in-class technology for interactivity, and more out-of-class quizzing and testing to make time for--and ensure students are ready for--that interactivity.

> *"I would like to express just how good those three days made me feel about working at the University of Oregon. For all the numbers-driven structures at this or any university, here was something that made me feel like a real professional in whom the university was investing because they cared not just about quantity, but quality. Both the incredible effort put in by the facilitators, and the fact that we were paid $1000 for our time, and the fact that I got to meet so many impressive colleagues, just left me with the most positive feeling."*

Sierra Dawson, who during the workshop got us interacting in small, rotating groups despite our lecture hall setting, went directly from the summer workshop to her summer HPHY 111 Science and Sex course, which she taught "from the center" in one of the Proctor LearnLabs. The entire course was developed using backward design, and she used Ken Bain's notion of a "promising syllabus" to shape how she initially presented the course, emphasizing the relevance/value of the course and coursework rather than letting the syllabus read first as a collection of policies and rules. She experimented with an idea we presented to help large-class instructors get to know the students and introduce the class to the class: a pre-term Qualtrics survey that collects student experiences and aspirations surrounding the course learning objectives; she also asked students to write a final reflection about their own learning in the course, boosting crucial metacognitive/learning-to-learn skills.

SOJC's **Laurie P. Honda** made significant and exciting revisions to a key--and unanimously the most difficult--course in the public relations sequence. These changes incorporated Bain's ideas about a "promising" tone and doing more than listing learning objectives on the syllabus by looping back to them throughout the term to help students see their own skills developing. She de-emphasized lectures and developed structures and rationales to--from day one--get students working with case studies, practicing the key questions and gestures of critically reading and analyzing these documents, and making students more accountable for their work. At the same time, Laurie is increasing students' choice and autonomy to maximize their motivation in the course. She presented her course plans at our October luncheon.

AEI's **Alison Evans** has long been committed to getting her international student language learners into the community and out of their comfort zones. The Working Group gave her technological tools to make the most of an independent project assignment that asks students to document their forays into the English-speaking campus and Eugene community, capturing new words and expressions, the affective dimensions of these interactions, and the strategies they used to communicate using fun, multimedia VoiceThread journals that allow them to annotate in speech and writing a series of central visual, audio, or written texts. Alison discussed her teaching during our December luncheon.

Chris Bell of Architecture & Allied Arts also has de-emphasized lectures in his course on campus architecture and preservation by upping the ante for student leadership in the classroom. He uses a Qualtrics survey to help him form intentional student groups that work together inside and outside of class; those groups develop and present a screencast analysis of the cultural layering of campus architecture and are tasked with experiential assignments to, for example, develop a physical and scientific understanding of UO building materials and their geographical footprint.

Ron Bramhall, who during the workshop led the group through a role play game staged in a lecture hall, has organized a content-heavy course in the Lundquist College of Business around a provocative, relevant, and deceptively simple question he now opens with and returns to: "how do you do the 'right' thing?" He has extended his use of learning objectives, now articulating them for every class meeting as a guide for students--and for himself, too, in a teaching context where the need to cover competes with making time for explicit skill-building and interaction. He also is explicit about metacognitive/learning-to-lean goals with his students. Ron continues to experiment with technology to allow for more interaction in class, like i>clicker2 and a Twitter feed, and with out-of-class electronic quizzing and testing to ensure students come to class prepared for those interactions.

Mike Urbancic, who is perhaps the most compelling campus expert on the use of i>clickers and got us all "clicking" during a mock lecture as part of the workshop, has revised his large EC 101 course toward a more conversational syllabus that explicitly links goals and activities. He is experimenting with exams that include a collaborative online component--ensuring that the exam is not just a summative test but another occasion to learn. He has launched a Qualtrics pre-term survey to get to know the students in this large, general education course. In spite of the class size and teaching in a discipline that often doesn't assign writing until advanced levels, Mike has students write reflections about his individual class meetings on index cards, in keeping with research that this helps cement what student have learned; his students also write papers, with the help of his new rubric and his intentionally formed peer writing groups.

Maram Epstein has proposed important changes to courses in her department. In order to create more time for explicit skill building in critical reading and writing in a large-format course that attracts many international students, Maram will now offer her Chinese Novel course at the 400-level and teach a new, lower-division Intro to Narrative course. That new course will teach literary analysis and academic writing using technological tools to streamline this process in a large course and help students visualize the building blocks and key gestures of literary narrative and academic writing.

Julie Weise (and Claudia Holguín's) 2-term class on Latinos in America (HIST 298 this term) epitomizes the principles and methods of active teaching and learning—in a bilingual setting, no less. Aimed at both Spanish Heritage speakers and English-only speakers with a reading knowledge of Spanish, the class is built around a corpus of source documents (primarily in Spanish) covering the last 100 years. Students have access to the source documents online, and do a variety of preliminary comprehension tasks on them for homework. In class, the focus is on analysis, context, and producing short reports. The class takes full advantage of its LearnLab meeting space: students work in teams of 4-5, tasks are differentiated according to language and content demands, and extensive use is made of iPads for marking up the source documents and presenting results.

The College of Education's **Cecilia Kirk** adopted a Team-Based Learning (TBL) format to teach a class that focuses on the assessment and remediation of speech sound disorders. Students reported that the TBL approach helped them to be more accountable for their own learning, increased their participation in group and class discussions, and developed their critical thinking skills. As one student expressed it, "this approach compelled me to look at the incoming information in a clinically meaningful way instead of just regurgitating what I'd read." Cecilia discussed her teaching at our December luncheon.

Kathie Carpenter reports that she had been using active learning techniques unsuccessfully for years in

her large lower division introductory International Studies course, but had found students found them confusing or regarded them as time-wasting "fluff." In the workshop, she says she learned that this was largely because she lacked an understanding of the theory behind them, and had therefore failed to convince students of their value, or to give them sufficiently clear instructions. In the workshop she learned ways to make activities more successful through more explicit framing of the goals and benefits. She also learned how to design activities in a more logical way so that components built on each other, and to give clear instructions in a way that helped students take the activities seriously and understand the benefits. The results were gratifying; she found that students engaged enthusiastically with activities that had fallen flat in previous years, and teaching the class was much less stressful for her as a result.

She also found the working group's discussions helpful for reality checks on issues such as workload and pacing of the course, and was able to adjust the homework expectations to a more realistic level. By aligning the workload more closely with other classes taught at the 200-level, she was able to redesign the syllabus to include more time for reflections and consolidation activities, so that students had more chance to process what they learned, increasing overall learning and retention.

She says most exciting indicator that the students had appreciated the value of active learning came when many of the students themselves devised ingenious active learning techniques in their group project presentations at the end of the term.