The Toolbox

A TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCE FOR INSTRUCTORS

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Expanding the Boundaries for Learning: Moving Beyond the Classroom Walls

recurring dilemma in higher education is how to design and implement the most powerful and productive learning experiences for our students. As a partial response to this question, Kuh, Douglas, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek (1994) suggest that to expand the boundaries of



learning beyond the classroom walls, college faculty should create instructional opportunities that "...integrate in-class knowledge with their [students'] out-of-class lives" (p. 79). This recommendation supports the maxim that learning in higher education gains depth and significance based upon the degree to which students are invited to apply, process, personalize, and engage instructional content (Cox & Orehovec, 2007; Spence, 2001).

Integrative out-of-class learning experiences can include a focus on building and enhancing relationships with faculty as well as enriching content-related knowledge and understanding. Tutt and McCarthy (2006) articulated the following learning outcomes that can flow from a connection between in-class knowledge and the out-of-class lives of our students:

- Expanding aesthetic and literary knowledge
- Increasing content domain knowledge
- Reflecting on practical day-to-day life applications of instructional content
- Learning and practicing skills
- Taking into consideration complex cultural issues
- Becoming aware of the impacts of spiritual or emotional experiences that are part of the learning process

In this issue of *The Toolbox*, we will explore some practical ways to make these important connections outside of the classroom.

Learning-centered faculty view undergraduates as active partners in learning rather than empty vessels to be filled. They exhibit an intellectual inquisitiveness that is contagious, thereby creating a sense of wonder and excitement in their students. They have high expectations for student performance, and challenge students to discover and use their intellectual and social capabilities by using the institution's resource for learning to full advantage.... They recognize that, for most students, knowledge must be applied to be useful and relevant. For this reason, learning-centered faculty members design assignments and class projects that help students purposefully integrate inclass knowledge with their out of class lives...

Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994, p. 79

Tweet and Wordle

An amazing 21st century spin-off of the traditional strategy of Exit Cards (i.e., asking students to complete a 3x5 card at the end of class that captures their response, questions, and level of understanding) uses Twitter and Wordle technology. For those who may still be struggling to figure out what a Facebook wall is, below are brief descriptions of these two new high-tech tools.

Twitter is a free social networking and microblogging service that allows users to send and read messages, which are called tweets. A tweet is an electronic message that is no more than 147 characters in length. Users can register for the service at www.twitter.com. While the service is free, there can be phone service provider fees for accessing the web site.



Wordle.net is a free web site that generates a graphic representation of words provided as text (e.g., from tweets). The created word cloud highlights (e.g., font size and color) words that are frequently mentioned.

Here are the steps to high-tech Exit Cards:

- After class, students are asked to tweet their instructor.
- The student's tweet should respond directly to a prompt provided by the faculty member (e.g., What was your main takeaway from today's discussion? How will you apply the materials and content that we discussed today?)
- Here is the really cool part! After responses have been recorded on Twitter, the instructor electronically copies the student's response and pastes it into the Wordle web site to create a word cloud.
- The highlighted text in the cloud provides a great way to assess the degree to which students are capturing the main ideas of a class or as a processing tool for additional discussions in subsequent class meetings.

Electronic Dialogues

A *dialogue* is an electronic exchange between a student and an instructor on specified topics related to course content and life applications. To maintain privacy and to allow for greater degrees of transparency, it is recommended that dialogues be conducted using e-mail. Students are asked to complete this task three to four times during the semester. Sending the required e-mails in a timely manner is factored into the grading system for the semester.

The e-mail dialogues focuses on questions such as "What have you been learning?" or "How does this content match with what you believe?" The content of dialogues often includes learning from the course, observations from assigned readings, connection with outside activities that trigger thinking about course content, and learning from life in general. After receiving the dialogue, and to complete the process, the instructor responds. Students appreciate knowing that faculty have read their dialogues and have taken the time to provide a timely response. This is yet another way of building connections with students outside the four walls of the classroom.



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Focused Topics

- Defining the sophomore-year experience
- Understanding sophomore students and their needs
- Factors that contribute to success for students in their second year of college
- Elements of a comprehensive institutional approach to sophomore success
- Curricular and cocurricular initiatives
- Strategizing to gain institutional support for sophomore programs
- Role of faculty in sophomore student success
- Assessing second-year programs

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Oral Examinations

One alternative to multiple-choice or true-false tests is the oral examination. Students are scheduled for a 30-minute conversation that requires them to integrate and apply course knowledge, skills, and dispositions as they respond to questions or scenarios posed by the instructor. To keep the process honest, the instructor asks students to select two or three questions randomly chosen from a pool of 8 to 10 available questions. Student responses are assessed based upon a rubric that identifies the big ideas that could or should be part of a comprehensive response.

This is a time-consuming activity, limited to small to medium class sizes, but one that yields great results and more face-to-face interaction for faculty and students. In the long run, however, oral examinations may take no more time than conventional grading of written examinations—and provide a significantly greater personalized learning process. For larger classes, where this strategy may be difficult to implement, consider offering this option as an alternative to traditionally assigned examination requirements.

Face-to-Face

As part of the required learning experiences for the course, students are asked to engage in a 15-minute interview or conversation with the instructor. These sessions are scheduled during the first two weeks of the semester. Meetings can occur in the instructor's office or in a campus coffee shop over a latte. These times of conversation offer an opportunity for students and faculty to begin sharing their story (e.g., who they are, how they ended up at the college, their aspirations for the future) and building a relationship. Face-to-face meetings are great ways to learn more about what students are thinking and feeling about the course and about their lives.

For classes with larger enrollments, consider the following options:

- Offer this option as an extra-credit experience.
- Provide students with the option of meeting with any instructor on campus and preparing a brief reflective summary of the interview. Although this does not accomplish the goal of creating interactions between you and your students, it does create an opportunity for students to build relationships with faculty.

Explorations

Quite often, group research projects are based on reviews of the professional literature and summaries of current research. Those elements are important and serve to ground students in understanding the current state-of-the art issues and the topic of concern. You can expand that exploration by requiring students to interact with professionals in the field who are actually doing the work the student is investigating. Explorations provide students with the opportunity to interview, shadow, and interact with the real world and with real people. One strategy for implementing these explorations is to require that students use one live source as a reference for their research projects. As an additional enticement, students could earn extra credit for including additional live references in the repertoire of informational sources.

Summary

Think of classroom walls as a porous material with information flowing in both directions. Consider ways to create knowledge and learning connections for your students that extend beyond the walls, across the campus, and into the community—connections that can also flow back within the walls and add new life and meaning to your course content. This can be how powerful and productive learning happens.

Cox, B. E., & Orehovec, E. (2007). Faculty-student interaction outside the classroom: A typology from a residential college. *Review of Higher Education*, 30(4), 343-362.

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Tutt, B., & McCarthy, S. (2006). Assessing learning outside the classroom. Assessment Update, 18(2), 1-10.

NEW RESOURCE

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The Toolbox

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