SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY
PAUL C. REINERT CENTER FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE

# CTE NOTEBOOK

**Volume 7, Issue 1, Summer 2004**

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**Mission Statement**

The mission of the Paul C. Reinert, S.J. Center for Teaching Excellence is to support Saint Louis University faculty and graduate students so that they can better serve the intellectual, spiritual, and social needs of all learners. To fulfill this mission the Center:

- Helps faculty and graduate students find their own directions, meaning and pedagogical style in the context of Jesuit traditions of education.
- Develops a community of scholars who encourage and challenge each other through mutual inspiration, mentoring and renewal.
- Supports faculty and graduate students in the development of skills and knowledge of pedagogical approaches using technology and other teaching innovations.

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## *From the Director . . .*

*Dr. Mary Stephen, Director*
*Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence*

One thing I have learned in my years of teaching is the importance of using the beginning of the first class in a course to "sell" the students on what they will learn in the course, to show my excitement for the topic and why I think it is important for them to learn this subject, and then to share with them what I expect of them, and in return, what they can expect from me as the teacher. This sets the tone for the course right from the start, and engages students more than reading rules and regulations from a syllabus engages them. This strategy makes sense when you realize that research indicates that students typically decide what kind of teacher you are and what kind of experience they will have being in your class in the first 15 minutes of that first class. Research also shows that instructors who make the most lasting impression on students are those who possess and generate enthusiasm for their subject and their students' learning.

There are many strategies for beginning a course in a way that establishes an environment for learning that makes students excited about coming to class and learning about the course topics. This issue of the Notebook focuses on strategies that Saint Louis University faculty use to create a positive environment for learning in their classrooms. We know that there are many more strategies than we have described in this newsletter. We invite you to email us (cte@slu.edu) additional strategies you may use and we will post them on our website.

You will notice some changes in the format of this issue of the newsletter. Several items that appeared previously in the newsletter, such as advisory board information and schedules for upcoming events can now be found on the Center's website (http://cte.slu.edu). We have worked to make the newsletter informative, but in a layout that is easier to read. We encourage you to let us know what you think of the changes we have made.

# Creating a Positive Learning Environment
# 10 Strategies

Instructors and student readily understand the concept of a positive learning environment. At times, however, it can be difficult to move beyond the abstract, "I know it when I feel it," to identify specific elements of positive learning environments. In the interest of providing food for thought and initiating a dialogue about strategies for creating a positive learning environment, a staff member from the Center for Teaching Excellence interviewed two Saint Louis University professors to learn about their approach.

Dr. Cheryl Cavallo and Dr. Lawrence Jones both received Faculty Excellence Awards from the Student Government Association for the 2003-2004 academic year. Dr. Cavallo is an assistant professor in the Department of Physical Therapy in the School of Allied Health Professions. Dr. Jones is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Decision Sciences & MIS in the John Cook School of Business. Decision Science is the science of decision-making using mathematical models, information technology, and statistical inferences.

### *Something to wrap their hands around*

Dr. Jones employs a variety of "props" in helping student relate to the subject matter, using everything from chunks of coal to candy to wooden table pieces as illustrations of otherwise abstract concepts.

For example, one of the topics he covers is the role of coal in day-to-day life. Many of his students, however, have never seen an actual piece of coal. When he saw an article in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporting that construction workers had discovered a coal seam at one of the MetroLink worksites, Dr. Jones knew he had "hit on the mother lode." He obtained a number of pieces of coal from the site and he now uses them to help his students relate to the discussion in class.

### *Help them relate*

"When we start talking about widgets and straps and supports, their eyes glaze over," Dr. Jones observes. However, he does not see the same reaction when he pulls out a copy of a McDonald's menu and nutrition guidelines. "Everybody in the class understands what a Big Mac is," he observes.

The information in the McDonald's menu provides a reference point for Dr. Jones to illustrate a variety of concepts, engaging their attention in a way that widgets, straps, and supports do not. "Then, when we send them home to do the problem, it's a little easier for them to address," Dr. Jones says.

Similarly, Dr. Jones uses materials from recent construction projects on Busch Student Center and Cook Hall to help students understand the details involved in project management. He found the construction companies who completed the project were willing to share their documents, "Usually, whenever I contact people like that, they're so willing to help." Those documents then provide a link between the brick and mortar buildings the students are familiar with and the words and phrases explaining concepts that can be somewhat abstract.

### *Encourage students to connect with you*

Each semester, the first assignment for students in Dr. Jones' classes is to send him an e-mail. He asks them a simple personal question, such as what is their favorite dessert or what they did during break. They are instructed to provide some details in their response, but not a lengthy message. They are also told to expect a reply from Dr. Jones.

This assignment serves two functions. "One is that they have to communicate," Dr. Jones explains, "If they don't get a response back, then we didn't really communicate." That communication frequently goes beyond a simple description, allowing personal insight such as one student's discussion of their grandmother's apple pie and the feelings it invoked or another student's disclosure of homesickness.

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The second function of the assignment is to increase students' comfort in e-mailing Dr. Jones, who notes that he emphasizes, "from that point on they can contact me 24/7."

### *Value feedback in all forms*

Dr. Jones frames his interaction with students in terms of a communication model. "You send a message and the receiver, the student, has to hear the message and then respond so that you are aware that they heard your communication," he explains. Within that model, students play an important role in the learning environment by giving Dr. Jones feedback on what he is communicating.

That feedback is not always verbal. For example, student performance on homework assignments represents feedback regarding comprehension and skills. "If I give an assignment and no one is able to complete it, then that tells me that I have not communicated with them effectively," Dr. Jones observes.

Similarly, Dr. Cavallo feels that it is important to be aware of feedback that might suggest that the learning environment is not conducive to learning. "It's not only a recognition of the positive, but it's also a recognition of when the environment's not good, when students are bored, when students are affectively giving you feedback," she explained. That feedback, she continues, may take the form of facial expressions, body posture, or low levels of participation.

Just as Dr. Jones notes the importance of the receiver responding to the message, Dr. Cavallo notes the importance of responding to the feedback students provide. "You need to stop and reassess," she says, mentioning that she sometimes asks herself "Is it because I'm cutting them off when they ask the questions? Is it because I'm not presenting the material in a way in which I'm engaging them as an active learner? What is the problem?"

Students' behaviors can also provide feedback about what is going well in the learning environment. "Watching their excitement in lecture or lab and allowing myself to feed off their excitement, their spontaneity is an indicator to me that it's been positive," Dr. Cavallo says.

### *Take charge of the learning space*

Dr. Cavallo does not use a podium, choosing instead to walk among the students. "I do tend, because some of mine are lecture, to be in the front of the room," she observes, "but I also like to get up and walk around in the middle of the room. I've been known to stand on the desks of students. I've been known to sit down on the floor and engage students." That said, Dr. Cavallo also recognizes that her style does not work for everyone: "I think some people can use the podium quite well and engage students beautifully without any difficulty, it's just not somewhere that's a comfortable place for me."

In some cases, the physical structure of the learning environment can pose a challenge, especially when the instructional design calls for discussion groups. "Some types of interactive learning are problematic unless you have the right kind of environment," Dr. Cavallo commented, with the caveat, "But, I still think the bottom line is: What does the instructor do? They may have the most beautiful small group room in the world, but if the person being the facilitator does not create a positive attitude, the physical structure of the room will not produce the result."

### *Be flexible*

Dr. Jones observes, "Every class does not work like clock work. What might work in one circumstance might not work in another circumstance." The willingness to be flexible and respond to student feedback may make the difference between a positive learning environment and a less than positive environment.

"The two of you or the three of you or the ten of you are all on a journey together and you aren't necessarily leading them, but rather that role of leadership is one that changes," Dr. Cavallo says. "Sometimes the students are the leaders taking you to new and exciting territory and sometimes you

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*(10 Strategies, continued from page 3)*
are the leader that takes them on an adventure."

***Focus on process as much as outcome***

While grades are a necessary part of the academic system, Dr. Jones and Dr. Cavallo emphasize not only the product that is graded, but also the process of getting to that product and grade. In Dr. Jones' classes, that emphasis means students need to understand the process they employed in obtaining a particular set of results. "I tell them I do not want clean computer printouts," Dr. Jones explains. "I want them to review their reports, markup, add notes and memoranda, so they understand what they've done and that they can interpret the output."

Dr. Cavallo discusses process in terms of standards for evaluation. She notes, "I have pretty high standards, but they are competing not against one another but against a set standard they are given." By discussing evaluation criteria with students when assignments are made, Dr. Cavallo helps students understand what is expected of them in the process of completing the assignment.

***Serve as a role model***

Dr. Cavallo finds that role modeling the behaviors she seeks is one of her most influential strategies in creating a positive learning environment. "If you role-model for them how you are continuing to learn, you are continuing to explore, you are continuing to share, then that role model is something that I think they can learn to identify with and, hopefully, emulate," she explains, detailing a number of the behaviors she feels are important to creating a positive learning environment.

For example, when students question a concept presented in class, an instructor role- modeling inquisitiveness will respond to the questions in a manner that indicates they are an acceptable part of learning. Similarly, Dr. Cavallo says, "I think as teachers we have to remember we shouldn't be afraid to say we know something is wrong, I want it to be better, let's work together to figure out how we can do that." Then, an instructor needs to listen when students offer suggestions, discuss those suggestions with the class, and incorporate a portion of the suggestions.

In Dr. Cavallo's field, Physical Therapy, the behaviors she role-models take on added significance given the relationship between coursework and clinical practice. For example, she strives to model behaviors that reflect respect for students as a group and as individuals. "That is what I would expect them to do as practicing health care professionals, to have respect for patients," she explains, "so in our particular case that is integral to not only the academic course work, but also to their clinical practice."

***Encourage behaviors you want to see***

In addition to modeling desired behavior, Dr. Cavallo notes it is important to encourage students when they demonstrate the positive behaviors. That encouragement can take a number of forms, from verbal praise, to displaying a positive attitude, to providing time in class. "If you don't do those things, the students automatically question your commitment," Dr. Cavallo observes.

***Share your enthusiasm***

"I think your enthusiasm, your obvious commitment to the subject matter, is critical in order to have the students engaged and wanting to participate," Dr. Cavallo says, noting that enthusiasm is often associated with commitment to the subject matter. That commitment, in turn, encourages students to engage with the material and participate in class.

At times, it is easy to lose that enthusiasm. "Go back and find the joy," Dr. Cavallo recommends, suggesting instructors reflect about why the subject matter is appealing and what sparked the initial enthusiasm. Then, students, professional groups, and colleagues can help renew that enthusiasm. "Don't withdraw and not open yourselves up to change and inspiration from others," Dr. Cavallo says.

"Just don't let it die out," Dr. Cavallo warns, "If you do lose the joy, our students are perceptive enough to feel any type of attempt to fake it."

# The Technology Corner

*Sandy Gambill, Assistant Director*
*Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence*
*and Coordinator of Technology and Learning*

It's mid-summer as I sit down to write this column. My brain is somewhere between next week's vacation and the course I'm scheduled to teach this fall. After having taught this same course for the last three semesters, I can honestly say that I'm not dissatisfied with the way things have been going. I'm pleased with the work my students have done, my students seem content with the course, (i.e., my evaluations are good), and the chair seems pleased. So why am I thinking about redesigning the course?

I would have to cite the same reason I hear voiced by many of the faculty who come through the Center: the need to constantly revisit what we do in order to assess what activities work best, while weeding out the outdated, boring, or ineffective. It's the chance to keep the course fresh, interesting, and relevant with new strategies, new content, or new assignments.

Redesign also gives me the exciting chance to incorporate new technologies into my course. I know I want to build more opportunities for student interaction and reflection into the course, so I've been daydreaming of blogs, electronic portfolios, wikis, and online discussions so completely captivating that the result might be the WebCT server crashing under the intensity of my students' demand for service! I know I need to pull myself out of this daydream and revisit my instructional goals and objectives. The ongoing battle is to select technologies that support instructional goals and objectives, rather than trying to utilize technologies that become an end in themselves. I'll let you know how things work out.

You might find some of our fall technology programs, outlined on page six, helpful if you are looking for professional development opportunities or technology resources to incorporate into your courses. In addition, CTE offers a full range of individual consulting and peer mentoring on instructional technology. Contact me at Gambill@slu.edu or 977-7202 if you'd like to discuss ways in which we might assist you.

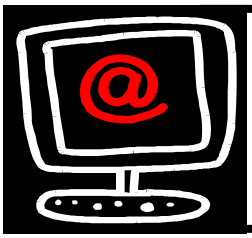
***Related Link:*** Blogs in Higher Education
http://www.mchron.net/site/edublog.php?id=M200403

*See page 6 for an overview of Fall Technology Programs*

You are invited to
the Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence
Open House

Thursday September 2, 2004 from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.
CTE Resource Room: DuBourg 261
Door prizes, freebies, and refreshments will be provided

# RESOURCES



## Fall Technology Programs

***WebCT Training***
ITS and CTE will once again collaborate to offer a full slate of WebCT training seminars in the fall semester. These courses will be of interest to first time WebCT users, as well as experienced users who want to learn more about the new version of WebCT. See http://cte.slu.edu/webct_training.html for more information.

***Sixty Minutes: Technology in an Hour***
This long time collaboration between CTE, Pius XII Memorial Library and ITS continues in the fall with sessions on survey and research tools, a new library tool for desktop document delivery, and an overview of the world of course management systems. See http://sixtyminutes.slu.edu for more information and registration.

***Fall WebQuest Projects***
Over the summer CTE and Pius XII hosted a very successful faculty development project on the construction of WebQuests. The project will be repeated twice this fall, once for faculty and once for graduate assistants. Developed by Dr. Bernie Dodge at San Diego State University, a WebQuest revolves around an open-ended question that can be approached from multiple perspectives. Students are presented with a task to complete, a process by which to complete the task, and suggested resources for research. According to Dodge, by pre-selecting resources the WebQuest creator is "using learners' time well, to focus on using information rather than looking for it, and to support learners' thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation." A WebQuest might be completed in one class session, over the course of a few weeks, or it might last for an entire course. See http://cte.slu.edu/webquest/ for more information.

## Creating a Positive Learning Environment

***In the CTE Faculty Resource Room***
The following materials, related to the strategies discussed on pages 2 through 4, are available by contacting the CTE office (Verhaegen 314, 977-3944, cte@slu.edu)

**Article:**
Yancey, Kathleen Blake. Getting Beyond Exhaustion: Reflection, Self-Assessment, and Learning. Clearing House. v72 n1 p13-17 Sep-Oct 1998.

**Book:**
Hamilton, Sharon J. Collaborative Learning: Teaching and Learning in the Arts, Sciences, and Professional Schools, 2nd edition, Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University, 1997.

**Video:**
"Questioning Strategies: Critical Thinking Requires Critical Questioning," lecture by Dr. James Elson.

**What are your strategies for creating a positive learning environment? Your favorite resources?**

**Share them with us! CTE@slu.edu**