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IMPROVING ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING THROUGH SHARING COURSE DESIGN WITH STUDENTS: A MULTI-LEVEL CASE

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Introduction

For five years, we co-taught a course called “Conceptual Issues in Psychology.” This is a capstone course in which students consider a number of key issues in Psychology, such as the role of nature and nurture in determining one’s life course, the factors that influence one’s perception of their life as being due to free-will or determined factors, and when Psychology does and does not function as a science. The course is designed inductively; students first encounter a complex, real-world problem or scenario related to the overarching topic at hand; throughout class discussions and out-of-class activities, we then scaffold students in connecting these exemplars to relevant research, scholarship, and theory.

Our experience of “teaching and learning together in higher education” has been multi-leveled. Initially, Dan designed and taught this course solo, first at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and then at the University of Kansas. In his role as the Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas he met and began collaborating with Sarah, who was a doctoral student in Psychology and graduate assistant at the teaching center at the time. Within the first year of Sarah’s work at the Center and second year of graduate study, they began co-teaching and co-designing the course.

This collaboration was further enhanced through ongoing partnerships with undergraduate students who had previously completed the Conceptual Issues course. Students often approach Dan at the end of the term with an interest in becoming involved in his research program, and since our shared research was pedagogical and the course was our “laboratory,” we invited several students to contribute their insights to the design of the course. We met weekly with our undergraduate collaborators, in both the semester leading up to the offering of the course and while the course was being taught. We discussed in detail the goals that we had for student learning for each section of the course, what was working well (and not as well as we would like), and ways in which we could maximize student learning and engagement with the material. Below are a series of brief narratives about the rich collaborations that followed from these multi-level exchanges.

Story 1: Enhancing Student Connections to Course Themes

One of our large themes for the course is to generate an understanding of self control, that is, the ability to make choices that yield a larger benefit after the passage of time while turning down choices that provide immediate but less valuable benefits. For several years we had introduced the topic by having students read about emerging water shortages caused by human decisions to consume more water than is locally available, both internationally and locally. After students stopped finding that topic engaging (few had any first-hand experience with water being restricted or unavailable), we tried other local topics that involved similar choices; a community

in Kansas was supporting the building of a coal-fired power plant that would provide jobs for construction and operation in the short term but would also generate air pollution over an extended period.

While discussing this part of the course with Justin Lynn, one of our undergraduate collaborators, he suggested that we try something that would be more relevant to the lives of students—the decisions made around food. Low fat or saturated fat? High calorie or lean meats and vegetables? Processed, sugar-laden foods or raw grains, fruits, and vegetables that contain fiber and essential nutrients? He pointed out that the easy choice was for convenience and flavor in foods, whereas the healthier options typically took more time, effort, and financial means to obtain and prepare, and often they were not as flavorful as the more accessible, prepared foods. Justin also pointed out other, less obvious aspects of self control choices related to food, such as exercising properly as part of a healthy choice and making food decisions that were more and less aligned with sustainable food production and delivery.

So, we looked to find a concrete introduction to the food questions that students might find interesting and engaging, as opposed to a nutrition text that makes the argument from chemical analysis of food and the processes of digestion. Justin was helpful here as well, suggesting a book he was reading by Michael Pollan (*In Defense of Food*), which he found very lively and pleasant reading. He suggested three chapters that we could all read that he thought emphasized exactly the kinds of choices we talk about and also mentioned many of the factors that influenced people's food decisions. The chapters were in fact focused on exactly the variables that we cited in class, and the reading was quick and enjoyable. To top it all off, Justin mentioned that Pollan had been a guest on the Daily Show, and there was a lively conversation between him and host John Stewart that we could access online. That six-minute segment turned out to be hilarious, engaging, and well-aligned with most of the key features of the choice that we wanted to explore in the course. We have now successfully shown that brief interview in class as an introduction to the readings to be done for the following class; it has a wonderful effect on the start of the conversation and gets the students eager for the reading and fully engaged with the topic.

Story 2: Making the Capstone Assignment Integrative

In addition to collaborating with our undergraduate colleagues on locating engaging and relevant entry points for each topic of the course, they have also provided valuable feedback on the assignments for the class. We always wanted their view of whether the assignments were well aligned with the nominal goals of the material, whether they were straightforward or confusing, and whether success on the assignments yielded an experience of understanding that was more than just remembering something. It was particularly useful to review the essay examinations from the course, as we needed to write new contexts for subsequent years' exams on the same conceptual material. One year we had extended conversations with Shane Kentopp, another student partner, about the mid-term examinations, and he was very helpful in sharing what made some essay topics more or less successful in providing an opportunity for him to demonstrate his understanding of the conceptual material in the context of a particular scenario. When it came time for the final exam, we figured our work was done; in previous years the final consisted of a subset of essay topics drawn from the three mid-term exams, but with changed scenario details, and Shane had helped us devise new contexts for the topics.

But Shane was dissatisfied with that whole approach to the final, pointing out that he had not felt challenged at all by the final exam; it was repetitive and uninteresting, in his view, and it did not give him an opportunity to consider the connections among the topics in the course. He suggested that we make the final truly comprehensive (not just nominally so with numerous topics) by providing a new context and asking for writing that integrated sections of the course, combining understanding of them into an extended essay that would be longer than any of the essays on the mid-term exams. It was refreshing to have a relatively obvious observation (our exams were not integrative) come from a student who was looking for a capstone assignment that would give him the opportunity to think across the whole body of work we had considered.

As a result of his suggestion, and with his full collaboration, we designed two integrative writing assignments that brought multiple forms of analysis and evaluation to the discussion of an extended example. One was based on a documentary film that we watched and discussed during class, and the other was based on a public radio documentary program that yielded many of the same questions about evidence for claims, the difference between social science and journalism/film-making, and the public policy implications of how psychological research illuminated the material at hand. The students first used a class period to write an essay addressing those issues in the documentary film; they were returned with comments and a grade, and the nature of the synthesis called for was unpacked and discussed among the students. Then the final exam had more or less the same conceptual structure, but this time the students wrote about the public radio documentary without having done extensive discussion of it during class time. After one year of the new system, the final exam was shifted to a take-home format to allow more time for thought, with excellent results. Thus, through this collaboration with Shane, we developed a capstone assignment that truly asked students to engage in the kinds of integrative thinking that we sought to foster across the course, resulting in richer learning for all.

Story 3: Using Out-of-Class Technologies

There is never enough time. One of the constant challenges that we face is how to provide students with the space and time to meaningfully reflect on and engage with the class material, so we have made the course a hybrid with online activities to maximize our collective interactive time. One such approach is the inclusion of online writing assignments between class meetings. Students are each assigned to a learning team of 4-5 peers, and before almost every class, all learning team members are asked to respond to an open-ended prompt about the class material. In addition to the benefit that students receive from organizing their thinking prior to our class discussion, we as instructors are able to use these prompts as guides for the discussion as well as indices of areas of confusion.

Initially, we used the “discussion board” feature of the Blackboard™ online course management system. In this format, the prompt is posted in a large textbox, and students’ responses appear in individual pull-down boxes underneath the initial prompt. However, we found that the depth and thoughtfulness of students’ responses had noticeably decreased across each semester, and we again asked Justin Lynn for his thoughts. In his view, the threaded discussion format was clunky and very different from the open-ended flow and structure of a blog format, a format which most students were comfortably using in their daily lives. He perceived the threaded discussion as clearly designed “for the instructor,” not for the student.

Taking this information to heart, we added blog prompts into the course format, at first alternating them in a somewhat systematic way with the discussion board. Given Justin's insight into how students were engaging with the material, we asked him to take a first pass at constructing the blog prompts, and we then collaboratively edited the prompts prior to posting them for students. Lo and behold, the nature of student writing changed; the responses were more engaged, more personal, and more interpersonal. Students were making connections to their family and friends and to their other courses, as well as writing in a deeper way about the course reading and class themes. More than anything, they were now writing to each other, rather than to us as the instructors. The blog format contributed to the creation of functioning learning teams.

From that point forward, we changed how we structured these discussions. For the most part, we use the blogs for out-of-class discussions, and the blog prompts are explicitly structured in such a way as to help students make connections to themselves, each other, and the overarching course themes. When we do use the threaded discussions, we use them as areas for clarification and exam preparation, rather than reflection.

Justin's insight, and the resulting changes that we collectively made to the course, were a great reminder to us that 1) students' perceptions of class format may be different from our own, and those perceptions are immensely valuable, and 2) we need to meet students where they are. As technology changes, the ways in which students engage with it will likely also change. Blogs, while they meet our learning goals for our students now, may not do so in the future. We will need to continue to be sensitive to their insights and perspective in order to best meet them where they are, and in term, best support their learning.

Story 4: Mentoring Graduate Students in Best Practices in Teaching

Finally, this series of narratives would be incomplete if I (Sarah) didn't say a few words about the role that participating in this collaboration played in my own development as a teacher and pedagogical researcher. This was not a typical graduate student teaching experience. Through my collaborations with Dan, Justin, Shane, and others, I was shown a model of how to engage in iterative, reflective practice about my teaching, to value the voice of students in their learning practice, and to be scholarly in my teaching. In our conversations about the course, Dan consistently challenged me to think about how all of our decisions related back to the overarching learning goals of the course, how we could more effectively guide our students' high level thinking about these concepts, and where to look for evidence that we were or were not meeting our goals for student learning. Each day, I was encouraged to bring new ideas to the course, voice connections that I saw between the course material and my daily life, and participate in a meaningful and fully collaborative way in the development and implementation of the course. As I reflect back on those years of ongoing partnership, I realize that I was a benefactor of a five-year pedagogical "think aloud," such that our daily conversations and larger weekly meetings about the course provided me with insight into expert-like thinking about teaching in a way that I now try to internalize and model in my own teaching practice.

And I (Dan) would be remiss if I did not mention how engaging and valuable it was to have a real intellectual partner in my ongoing inquiry into learning in my course. Most graduate

teaching assistants are given the routine tasks associated with a course such as keeping records, grading papers and exams, holding sections to discuss pre-determined questions, or fielding email questions from students; these are the work that faculty members have done many times and no longer find creative or interesting. Instead, by engaging an advanced graduate student in the process of design and evaluation of a learning environment, I gained high-quality company in my search for improvements in students' understanding. While Sarah may have seen my comments as comparable to an expert talk-aloud, I benefitted greatly from her responses to and elaborations of my comments. Rather than a soliloquy of my musings about the course, there was a continuous colloquy with a partner that produced generative interaction and growth of ideas through iterative commentary and development.

Insights Gleaned from our Collaborations and Collaborators

There is much talk in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) circles about the student voice and about having students participate in inquiry into effective instruction. While there is great disparity among faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates in their knowledge of their fields, skills in intellectual interactions, and understanding of instructional design, there is wisdom in the experiences that each of those groups have with college level courses and learning environments, and having all those perspectives in a single conversation gives a fuller picture of how learning is or is not taking place. We found that including undergraduates in the design conversation did not lower the level of discourse, but instead it illuminated aspects of the learning experience that were not visible to faculty members or even to graduate students, who are often much closer to undergraduates in age and experience. We found that it was very valuable to work with students on our course, and it went far beyond any suggestion for nominal inclusivity. Further, by including graduate students as meaningful teaching partners, developing teachers receive valuable mentoring and feedback while contributing to an enhanced teaching and learning experience.

Beyond the functional value for improved course design, we also have noted a subtle but powerful influence on our attitudes toward students in our classes and toward teaching undergraduates in general. There are many ways that working with typical undergraduates can be exasperating to course instructors. Poor attendance or preparation, priorities that favor non-academic pursuits, lack of responsibility for failures, and just youthful lapses in decorum or respect can lead over many years to a gradual erosion in enthusiasm for the day-to-day parts of our work with undergraduates. Being in close dialogue with a few students and hearing their experience of and insights into our carefully crafted courses can help restore a sense of humanity to the enterprise. We did not select just the best and the brightest for this collaboration; we accepted people who wanted contact with our work and were interested in spending time discussing it with us. Indeed, hearing perceptions of the course from students across preparation levels contributed to a more inclusive and engaging environment for all. The goodwill we encountered among our undergraduate student partners, year in and year out, spread to our own understanding of the social world we create in a college course. That intangible benefit has been as valuable to our careers as scholarly teachers as the documented increases in learning that we present at conferences.