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## Using Virtual Space to Enhance the Classroom

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For several semesters, I have required students to keep electronic journals. Given the emerging interest in blogs, this past semester, I replaced my Blackboard discussion board with a course weblog in my expository writing course. While the virtual spaces can be used in similar ways, Blackboard is designed as a course management site or a contained online learning space; weblogs, or blogs, tend to be websites maintained and published by individuals. These virtual spaces offer similar benefits to both students and faculty. How we integrate these spaces into our courses, I argue, is equally important. After a review of the benefits, I offer some tips for making the electronic journal a vital part of a student's experience in any course.

First, all electronic journals provide students with a space for revisiting and reflecting on class discussions. I am often pleasantly surprised by the class topics students revisit online, and on some days when I leave class wondering if students took away anything worthwhile from our discussion, comments appear on the course weblog that reveal learning and comprehension. Through their online writing, students develop a better understanding of course content. If time or a lack of confidence prevents a student from contributing in class, the online environment provides enough space and time for every student.

In addition, these exchanges take place in a relatively public forum. Students get feedback from a variety of readers. Questions force them to explain more

fully and defend their positions. They learn to become aware of a larger audience. And my comments are not the only responses a student receives on his or her writing.

Oftentimes, the electronic journal provides me with insights into my students that are not always readily discernible in a class discussion. For example, a student recently appeared despondent in class. I thought she was bored or unprepared. After checking her blog, I discovered she was struggling with a family problem and considering dropping out of the program. While I do not encourage my students to use the electronic journals to air personal problems, students do occasionally use the space for such a purpose.

Electronic journals can be a useful addition to a course, but their successful application stems from the ways in which we integrate the electronic journals into our courses. These suggestions can enhance a faculty member's and a student's online experience.

• **Require both original postings and reaction postings.**

I ask students to post two comments each week. The first is an original idea—something inspired by the course readings or class discussions. In addition, I ask students to post a reaction to another student's posting, which requires them to read at least one student posting. Interestingly, because some posts receive more hits than others, students begin to gauge the success of their writing based on reader interest.

• **Respond to students' electronic postings.**

Be sure to read the postings and let stu-

dents know you are dropping in on a regular basis. I use student postings as a way to generate discussion in class. I pull up samples in class and highlight certain passages as a way to validate a student's ideas.

• **Participate in the forum in limited ways.**

I rarely ask students to address specific questions in the electronic forum. I want students to determine the direction of the online discussions. I do, however, occasionally ask students to elaborate on particular points when I see room for further reflection. I remind students that their readers need to understand their ideas, and good elements of writing become important in this regard. However, I rarely comment on writing style, grammar, or punctuation. I want students to be able to turn off the editor in their heads who continually reproaches them for bad writing, so that they can focus on their ideas.

• **Make the writing count.**

Students need to know that this kind of writing does matter. I make the electronic

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- Write directly to the audience, remembering that this is a newsLETTER.
- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
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## Promoting Intellectual Development with Problems

As part of a long, two-part article that explores the intellectual development of science and engineering students, Richard Felder and Rebecca Brent propose an instructional model (or way of teaching) that promotes this growth. Among a number of conditions that they identify as being relevant to intellectual development, they propose particular kinds of problems for students to solve. Their list (summarized below) offers ideas relevant in any course where students solve problems.

• *Predicting outcomes*—“Describe physical demonstrations or experiments and have students predict the outcomes and then describe (or if possible, carry out) the demonstrations or experiments and show the actual outcomes.” (p. 281) It is beneficial when students make incorrect predictions. If they are directly confronted with wrong mental pictures, they will be very motivated to make corrections and learn the right perspective on the problem.

• *Interpreting and modeling physical phenomena*—In these problems, students are provided with data from a real or a hypothetical experiment, and then they are asked to use course concepts to explain the results.

• *Generating ideas and brainstorming*—The idea here is to use open-ended exercises to disconnect students from their belief that every problem has one right answer. For example, a teacher might present students with a product design and have them brainstorm as many possible flaws and failures as they can think of. No answer is considered wrong during the brainstorming process.

• *Identifying problems and troubleshooting*—Describe a device (such as a process or system) that is not working effectively, and ask students to speculate on the possible causes of the problem. They might also be asked to devise experimental tests that would confirm or refute their suppositions.

• *Formulating procedures for solving complex problems*—In this situation, students are given “incompletely specified problems.” (p. 282) They start by itemizing

what they know. Next they list what they need to know, and finally students explore how they will determine those unknowns. For example, would they look up the unknowns? calculate them? measure them? estimate them from empirical correlations? use rules of thumb?

• *Formulating problems*—Rather than always giving students the problems, turn the tables. Have students look at previous course content from a designated time period (for example, one week, three weeks) and make up the problems that they then also solve. Challenge students (maybe by giving more credit) to come up with problems that require complex analysis, critical examination, or creative thinking.

• *Making judgments and decisions and justifying them*—“Call on students to make and support judgments on ambiguous or controversial matters.” (p. 282) The point here is not the conclusion per se but the quality of the evidence and reasoning mustered to support their position. In order to do this, students must be taught to evaluate evidence in terms of its reliability and validity.

“Including a variety of problems types in assignments serves an important purpose besides promoting intellectual growth and adoption of a deep approach to learning. Some students are gifted in ways that may not show up on straightforward homework problems. When they are assigned problems that call for different skills, they sometimes discover talents they may not have known they possessed. The effect of this discovery on their self-confidence and subsequent performance levels—even on more conventional problems—can be quite dramatic.” (p. 282)

Reference: Felder, R. M. and Brent, R. (2004). The intellectual development of science and engineering students. Part 2: Teaching to promote growth. *Journal of Engineering Education*, October, 279–291.

## Another Metaphor for Teaching Excellence: Machiavelli's *The Prince*

By Paul Teverow, Missouri Southern State University  
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Donna Bowles recently offered some useful and stimulating ideas on how the film *The Wizard of Oz* suggests the “characteristics necessary for teaching excellence.” I’m sure that Professor Bowles prompted many of us to consider other classics that serve as sources of pedagogical inspiration. For me, it’s a text I use in several of my courses, Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, a famous and short book on political theory and practice produced in Renaissance Italy.

Yes, I know what some of you are thinking! What can classroom teachers, whose efforts cannot succeed without a minimum level of integrity on the part of themselves and their students possibly learn from an author who has become a byword for amoral if not immoral conduct? Well, to begin with, teaching, no less than politics, involves the wielding of power that can have profound and lasting influences. Moreover, power that can be used to do good can also be used to do harm. The longer I teach, the more I am convinced that Machiavelli’s advice regarding the exercise of power can be of value to anyone who finds him- or herself in front of a classroom, whether early or relatively late in a teaching career. Let me offer just a few examples [Quotations are from the Norton Critical Edition of *The Prince*, translated by Robert Adams (1992)]:

1. “if you have to make a choice, to be feared is much safer than to be loved.” (Chapter 17, p. 46) Nearly every teacher has the very human impulse to be liked, admired, and, yes, loved by one’s students, and in and of itself, that’s certainly not a bad thing. My experience, though, has taught me that when they love their teacher, students will more easily excuse themselves for letting the quality of their work slip or missing deadlines than when they justly fear the consequences of submitting slipshod or late work. However, as Machiavelli warns,

2. “a prince should make himself feared in such a way that, even if he gets no love, he gets no hate either; because it is perfectly possible to be feared and not hated.” (Chapter 17, p. 46) It’s not only unpleasant to be the object of hatred; it also reduces your effectiveness as a teacher. Anyone who has suffered the glare in the eyes of a student who judges you guilty of unfairness, pettiness, or hypocrisy knows exactly what I mean (and few of us, I suspect, have not been there at some time). The energy the student puts into hating you (and make no mistake about it, hatred takes a lot of energy) inevitably saps the energy that should be used to master the course material. Furthermore, the hatred you incur from one student will more likely than not affect the morale of the entire class.

3. “A prince should have no other object, no other thought, no other subject of study, than war, its rules and disciplines; this is the only art for a man who commands . . . The quickest way to lose a state is to neglect this art; the quickest way to get one is to study it.” (Chapter 14, p. 40) Begin by substituting “teaches” for “commands.” Remember, I’m using *The Prince* as a metaphor, so, no, I’m not recommending that the successful teacher acquire martial arts training or AK-47s! However, this quotation does serve to remind us that just as preserving the security of a nation is the quintessential responsibility of its leaders, so the teacher dare not lose sight of his or her primary responsibility, namely, to profess a discipline to the best of one’s ability. To be sure, distinguishing between the essential and the trivial and presenting what is essential clearly, accurately, and in light of current scholarship in your teaching fields are not all that go into teaching excellence. However, nothing else you do can make up for losing sight of your principal “subject of study.”

4. Conversely, even though the successful teacher, like the successful political leader, would ideally like to have “all those [qualities] that are considered good, . . . since it is impossible to have and exercise

them all, because the conditions of human life do not allow it, a prince must be shrewd enough to avoid the public disgraces of those vices that would lose him his state.” (Chapter 15, p. 43) Especially in recent years, college faculty have been inundated with an ever-widening stream of ever-longer lists of the requisite qualities that the model teacher should possess. Trying to remember, let alone exhibit, these qualities all the time can intimidate to the point of paralysis. But, to go back to points 2 and 3, if you safeguard your reputation for knowing your discipline, for presenting and exploring it in a clear and compelling manner, for inviting and indeed requiring your students to join you in exploring it, and for treating your students with respect and assessing their knowledge fairly, you can, as one of my colleagues once put it, “pretty easily fake the rest” as the occasion demands.

5. Finally, let me offer what I take to be the thesis of *The Prince*: “A great many men have imagined states and principedoms such as nobody ever knew or saw in the real world, [but] there’s such a difference between the way we really live and the way we ought to live that the man who neglects the real to study the ideal will learn how to accomplish his ruin, not his salvation.” (Chapter 15, p. 42) Teaching, like politics, is an “art of the possible.” (In this case, my inspiration is Otto von Bismarck.) And devising course content and teaching strategies to match what “should” work rather than what actually does work can bring ruin to the best intentions of even an earnest teacher and motivated students. Niccolò Machiavelli may have intended his strictures regarding the use and misuse of power for ambitious “princes” or despotic rulers in early 16th century Italy. Some 500 years later, though, his advice reminds aspiring professors to teach and assess according to the way we and our students really live. ♥

## How to Get Wet without Plunging In: Creative Ways to Start Class

By *Patty Kohler*,  
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Starting a lecture can be challenging: Getting everyone seated, attentive, and ready to move forward with the content can take several minutes. I have found that sometimes it feels abrupt and disjointed, especially when it has been a week since the last class meeting, so I've been working on strategies that help me get a class going without wasting time and that get all the students engaged and ready to learn. I now begin each lesson with a creative review of the last week's materials. The reviews involve a variety of techniques for getting students to reflect on previous content and ready to move on to new information. They also help with building relationships, a critical component of teacher-student interactions. Here are some of the strategies that I think work best to accomplish these goals.

### Who's Your Partner?

Using sticky-back name tags, I put three or four names that go together on the tags. Some examples are John, Paul,

Ringo, and George, or Bill, Chelsea, and Hillary. I then randomly put the name tags on the backs of students. The students are allowed to find their partners by asking only yes and no questions. When they find the rest of their group, I have them work on a short review assignment. This can be a list of questions from the previous week's content or a reflection or anything that requires that they work together. The process of finding the rest of the group takes only a few minutes and gets students active and focused.

### Piece the Puzzle

For this activity, I break the content from the last lecture into four or five sections. Then I take key points from each section and make them into jigsaw puzzles, one puzzle for each section, with five or six pieces per puzzle. I jumble the pieces and give a set of puzzles to each group of students. I generally make each set of puzzles on a different color of paper and put the jumbled pieces in a ziplock bag. Each group completes all the puzzles. This requires them to categorize previously learned information. I like to engage in competition for prizes from the local dol-

lar store. The first table to complete all the puzzles correctly wins the prize. Another variation is to give each student a piece of a puzzle and have the student locate the other four or five students who have pieces to the same puzzle—I don't make the puzzles different colors in this case.

### Roundtable Review

With this activity, I have students get out a sheet of paper and write a list of numbers from one to ten. Then I instruct them to put one important idea from the previous lecture on the first line. The paper is passed to the person on the left. Each time the paper is passed, the person receiving the paper writes a different idea. After a few minutes I call time, and the papers go back to the original owner. This represents a collection of ideas for future review and study.

I have found that the preparation for these activities takes very little time and that the results are very worthwhile. My students anticipate the activities, and I look forward to having the students in a place where they are ready to learn. 🍀

## How to Handle Student Excuses

“Grandpa’s heart exploded, but he’s fine now,” one student reported the morning after missing a scheduled exam. “I caught dyslexia from another student last semester,” responded another when his teacher asked him about all the spelling mistakes in his paper. And then there was the pet rabbit that swallowed a needle on the day of the big group presentation. Excuses like these are so preposterous that they can’t help but make us laugh, but dealing with them is no laughing matter.

As a recent book for new psychology teachers points out, “The way you handle excuses conveys a message to your students about your teaching philosophy, and most

particularly about whether you view students as partners or adversaries, the degree to which you trust them, and how you care about them.” (p. 137)

The trick is separating the legitimate, bona fide excuses from the contrived, just plain made-up ones, and there are lots of gradations in between. Sometimes a teacher needs the wisdom of Solomon.

Some faculty opt for the hard line . . . no excuses accepted, none, under any terms. That was my policy early on. Then one semester a responsible, dedicated student lost his father in a car accident. He missed an exam to attend the funeral. In a situation like that, the hard-line policy

fails pitifully.

On the other hand, it does seem absolutely true that the more excuses you accept, the more you are asked to consider. You can err on the side of gullibility. And learning that an excuse placates for missed deadlines, scheduled presentations, and far-in-advance exam dates should not be the lesson reinforced by experiences in college.

And so the teacher must adjudicate with firmness and with finesse. I’d like to report that it gets easier with age. It doesn’t. Some students are very good at making

## Better Understanding the Group Exam Experience

The debate continues: is it fair and appropriate to give individual students a group grade based on the performance of the whole group? Experts stand on both sides of the issue. For individuals considering the use of group grades, that decision needs to take into account how students perceive the group exam experience. The study referenced below explores a number of relevant student perceptions.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to “elicit the reflections” of students (140 undergrads and 202 grads) who participated in a fairly lengthy group exam experience. Their three-member groups worked together on a variety of tasks for three weeks prior to taking a written exam in their group. Researchers used a “hermeneutic phenomenological” approach that had students respond to this query: “You have just completed your first cooperative examination. Please describe how you felt preparing for the examination, and how you feel now that you have completed the examination.” (p. 84) This qualitative method also prescribes how data are to be examined and organized. In this case, comments clustered around eight different themes, which are highlighted and briefly discussed below.

- *Feeling support and or reinforcement*—Every undergraduate and almost 50 percent of the graduate students felt supported and reinforced by the experience. One undergraduate explained, “We learned how to rely upon one another to achieve a goal.” (p. 85)

- *Feeling relaxed and confident*—A significant number of undergrads and graduate students reported experiencing less of the anxiety and stress usually associated with taking exams. They felt less alone, and that added to their feelings of confidence, even when they faced the exam’s most difficult questions.

- *Everyone knowing the material and doing his or her part*—Almost 40 percent of the undergrads and 67 percent of the grads made comments about how their group

members stepped up to the plate. Fellow group members prepared, contributed, and helped complete the exam.

- *Gaining a deeper understanding of the information*—Confirming what previous research has documented, a significant number of these students made comments about how working on the material in their group provided them with a deeper understanding of the content.

- *Not wanting to let the group down*—A smaller percentage (15 for the undergrads and 13 for the grads) commented on how they were motivated to study more because they didn’t want to let the group down. In the words of one student, “This forced me to study. I didn’t want to be a weak link.” (p. 88)

- *Feeling stressed*—Only 13 percent of the undergraduates and 6 percent of the graduate students expressed that they found the group exam experience stressful.

- *Being concerned about group members’ preparation*—Also surprising was the fact that only 13 percent of the undergraduates and 5 percent of the graduate students worried about how their group members would perform. And among those expressing this concern, the experience proved that their concerns were unfounded. As one student remarked, “We could have made our lives simpler by trusting each other.” (p. 89)

- *Forming positive opinions about the group*—Six percent of the undergrads and 22 percent of the grad students wrote positively about their specific group. They reported that their group worked well together, that they were part of a good team, and that group members treated each other well.

Many of the feelings and experiences reported by the students in this study do not confirm some of the fears that faculty have about using group experiences: that the bright, grade-motivated students will do the work for the rest of the group and that the pressure of having to perform collectively for a grade will cause groups to implode. The reactions of these students to

an open-ended query that did not direct their responses reaffirms the learning potential inherent in collaborative experiences. The analysis of their responses does not answer the question of the propriety of group grades for individuals, but what these students report certainly relates to that question.

Reference: Morgan, B. M. (2005). Cooperative learning in higher education: A comparison of undergraduate and graduate students’ reflections on group exams for group grades. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 16(1), 79–95. 🍀

### EXCUSES

#### FROM PAGE 4

up stories, and some with legitimate excuses don’t present them very persuasively. The net result is that sometimes even concerned and caring teachers make mistakes. If they can be rectified, fine; if not, life does go on.

As for a general rule of thumb, the book reference below recommends “taking a firm, consistent, rational and caring approach to excuses that incorporates a ‘trust, but verify’ policy. Treat every excuse as genuine, but in fairness to the entire class, required that it be accompanied by supporting documentation.” (p. 137)

Reference: Lucas, S. G. and Bernstein, D. A. *Teaching Psychology: A Step by Step Guide*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005. 🍀

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## Teaching, Research, and Salary

No one can deny that during the past 10 to 15 years there has been a significant push to raise the stature of teaching. Maybe it launched with the now well-known Boyer report that revisited notions of scholarship. Maybe it was the widely acclaimed Barr and Tagg article on making learning the focus of institutional effort. Whatever the force or forces that moved to bring teaching to the forefront, few would deny that, as a consequence, teaching has been the focus of significant attention.

In the early 1990s, higher education researcher James Fairweather used data from the National Survey of Postsecondary Faculty (an annual survey sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics) to explore relationships between teaching, research and faculty pay. Five years after this first analysis Fairweather decided to repeat the study to see if “the decade-long push for greater commitment to teaching and learning” (p. 403) was being reflected in faculty pay. He wondered whether “the monetary value of teaching [had] increased” in the intervening five years and whether kind of institution (as per the Carnegie classification scheme) made a difference.

The methods used in this analysis of the relationships between teaching, research and pay are quite complex and not easily explained in a short space. Those interested in the methodological approach are encouraged to look at the research—it is cited below. But an identification of the variables related to teaching and research is essential to making the results meaningful. Fairweather used three variables related to teaching: 1) hours per week spent in the classroom; 2) whether the instructor taught only undergraduate students, both graduate and undergraduate students, or graduate students only; and 3) whether the faculty member showed evidence of collaborative instruction (defined in the study as a variety of active learning approaches). To document research productivity, Fairweather looked at the number of refer-

enced publications (a list of what that includes appears in the article). In the analysis he controlled for variables like academic discipline, gender and length of contract, as well as others.

As for the findings: “Teaching and research behaviors contributed significantly to the variance explained in pay for faculty in all four types of institutions in both 1992-93 and in 1998-99.” (p.410) In the 1992-93 study it explained between 47 and 67 percent of the variance, and in 1998-99 between 41 and 54 percent. Hours spent in the classroom per week was significantly, negatively related to pay in research, doctoral-granting and comprehensive colleges both in 1992-93 and in 1998-99. At liberal arts colleges weekly hours in the classroom was not significantly related to pay in the first analysis but it was slightly negatively related in 1998-99. For all institutions, in both the first and second analyses, the type of student taught also made a difference. “Teaching graduate students only was positively related to pay, whereas teaching only undergraduates was negatively related to it.” (p. 411) “In sum, in 1998-99 for the vast majority of faculty *irrespective of institutional type* teaching an additional hour remained a negative factor in pay and publishing an extra article a positive factor in pay.” (p. 412)

The overall conclusion at the end of the article is even more sobering. “Despite decade-long efforts to enhance the value of teaching in 4-year colleges and universities, this study shows that spending more time on teaching, particularly classroom instruction, still means lower pay. . .The declining monetary value of classroom instruction across types of institutions should give us all pause to consider the fit between our rhetoric about the value of teaching and the rewards accrued by faculty who teach the most. Especially troubling is the declining value of classroom teaching over time in teaching-oriented institutions.” (p. 412)

Reference: Fairweather, J. (2005).

Beyond the rhetoric: Trends in the relative value of teaching and research in faculty salaries. *Journal of Higher Education*, 76 (4), 401-422. ♥

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### VIRTUAL SPACE

FROM PAGE 1

journal anywhere from 10 to 20 percent of a student’s final grade. The grade I assign is based on the number of entries and the quality of the entries. As a class, we have discussions about this throughout the semester.

#### •Be open to the unexpected.

We create our syllabi with specific weekly lessons in mind. Although the electronic journal can complement our existing teaching plan, it becomes a more dynamic component of the course if we remain flexible and are open to modifying a class discussion based on a student posting we may have read only the night before. In doing so, we grant students a greater role in determining the direction of the course.

Electronic journals need not be a burden for a faculty member carrying a heavy teaching load or under pressure to publish. They can be a useful way to extend the learning beyond the classroom space. From a faculty member’s perspective, electronic journals provide insights into student learning and help to generate class discussions, but these benefits do not accrue automatically. Virtual contributions must be integrated into the class. Providing students with guidelines and validating their writing can lead them to make new discoveries about course content through the act of writing. ♥

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