



The Lesson is Too Much with Us: Recognizing Teaching Moments

By John A. Dern, Temple University, PA
jdern@temple.edu

In William Wordsworth's well-known sonnet "The World is Too Much with Us; Late and Soon," the titular line's meaning hinges on two words, the latter of which may initially seem insignificant: "world" and "with." "World" refers to human affairs; and, of all the definitions for "with," Wordsworth uses it in the sense of "accompany" or "attend": human affairs too much attend us. We are so concerned with the minutiae of daily life, with "getting and spending," as Wordsworth says, that we miss what is truly important.

The same can be said of our classes. Sometimes we are so concerned with following our lesson plans to the letter that we miss what is truly important: teaching moments. A teacher has to learn to *listen* to his or her class and realize when the moment to abandon the lesson plan has come. This willingness to release some control over the class and allow it to develop more or less organically does not always come easily, however. Goal-induced anxiety can make a teacher reluctant to let go of the reins out of fear that the class will go off in some random direction.

I still vividly recall the first day I ever taught a class. It was August 1991, and I was a graduate student. Sitting on some steps just outside of the classroom building, I was literally trembling with worry. Would 22 freshmen really believe I had anything worthwhile to say? Could I convince them of the content's value? Would I be able to maintain control of the class?

On that day, and for many semesters to come, I held very closely to my prearranged lesson plan, rarely loosening my grip on the reins for fear that otherwise I wouldn't be able to accomplish the goals that my department and I myself had set. My mistake was in believing that only one path, that is, the narrow path revealed by my lesson plans, would lead my students to those goals. The lesson was too much with me.

In February 2008, I had two of the best classes I have ever had, and their success had next to nothing to do with my lesson plan for those days. My students had read John Milton's *Areopagitica*, and my intention was to use the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as the paradigm for a discussion of Milton's arguments for freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press. I introduced this scheme, and the first class proceeded (with modest success) with the students, for some little time, analyzing *Areopagitica* along this line.

As the discussion continued, however, Milton's unorthodox opinion of the transgression of Adam and Eve emerged from the text. I hadn't planned to make too much of this point, but I quickly noticed a change in the tenor of the class as it was broached. The students were genuinely interested in what Milton had to say on this point.

I let go.

The ensuing discussion, which continued from one class into the next, was one of the most vibrant in which I have ever participated. More important, the students, recognizing Milton's connection

between humans' ability to use reason and Adam and Eve's transgression, almost unwittingly got to the foundation of his arguments for freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press. In other words, they achieved the desired goal by walking a path very different from the one provided by my lesson plan.

During my 17 years of teaching, I have tried to make myself more aware of the fact that a lesson plan is a tool, not an end in itself. A teacher has to be willing to let a class develop organically because classes are organic. Every class is different, and the teacher has to listen to know when an opportunity for a teaching moment has arisen, for such moments are more valuable than whole semesters of rote. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe observes in his meditation on marriage, *Elective Affinities*, "A teacher who can arouse a feeling for one single good action, for one single good poem, accomplishes more than he who fills our memory with rows on rows of natural objects, classified with name and form." 🍀

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**Editor**

Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D.
E-mail: grg@psu.edu

Magna Editor

Rob Kelly
robkelly@magnapubs.com

President

William Haight
whaight@magnapubs.com

Publisher

David Burns
dburns@magnapubs.com

Creative Services Manager

Mark Manghera

Art Director

Deb Lovelien

Customer Service Manager

Mark Beyer

For subscription information, contact:

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E-mail: custserv@magnapubs.com
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- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
- If you'd like some initial feedback on a topic you're considering, you're welcome to share it electronically with the editor.

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Vocabulary Tests as Game Shows

By Elizabeth C. McCarron,
Bentley College, MA
emccarron@bentley.edu

Teaching an introductory information technology course for first-year students, I cover “fun” hands-on topics like creating Web pages, designing spreadsheets, preparing multimedia presentations, and building networks. Much to my students’ chagrin, I also need to ensure that they learn the “boring” vocabulary.

This semester, I ditched the midterm and became a game show host. I divided students into six teams and prepared five rounds of games:

Round One: 20 Questions—an online exam. One person from each team controlled the computer, clicking the team’s multiple-choice answers. The lowest-scoring team was out of competition. The other five teams moved to the next round.

Round Two: Charades—I wasn’t sure how the students would react, but it was a big hit. One person from each team acted out the same phrase in front of the classroom (e.g., “shoulder surfing,” “booting a computer”). Of course, no talking allowed! There were four phrases to guess, and when a team guessed correctly, it moved on to the next round and was not allowed to guess anymore. Four groups progressed.

Round Three: Pictionary—One person from each team drew clues on the blackboard (e.g., “firewall,” “Dumpster diving”). When one team guessed correctly, it was through to the next round and the rest of the teams switched artists and kept going. Three groups moved onward.

Round Four: Jeopardy—I built a simple Web page with categories (e.g., “hardware,” “software,” “RAM”) and dollar amounts, which was displayed via projector. Each team was given a means of “signaling in” to answer a question. Teams had to respond in the form of a question, which led to much consternation and screams from the peanut gallery if an answer wasn’t formed appropriately. With all questions answered, we moved to Final Jeopardy—a single question on which teams could wager any amount of

their winnings. The two teams with the most money moved forward. For this round, a colleague kept score because it got confusing with reading, clicking, and adding/subtracting money on the fly.

Final Round: Grab the Falcon—My stuffed Falcon (our mascot) sat on a table. The two final teams lined up on opposite sides of the table, facing each other, hands behind backs. I asked a question, and whoever grabbed the Falcon first was allowed to answer and stay in the game. Right answer, people moved to the back of their line. Wrong answer, they sat down. The team with the last member(s) standing won the competition.

What did I learn? The students enjoyed the games and had fun. I was worried that they would think it was “lame,” but they really got into it. Nothing got past them! I had also worried about students becoming bored once they were out of competition, but even my colleague noted that all students stayed engaged, cheering and providing moral support.

After class I created a blog for comments, and a few students wrote that charades and Pictionary, while fun, did not really test their vocabulary knowledge. I realized they were right! So for the next competition, I substituted Beat the Clock (solve complicated Excel equations in two minutes, no computer allowed) and Taboo (get your teammates to guess a vocabulary word from your description without using four “taboo” words in your description), which were better tests of students’ knowledge. The second competition actually showed more of what they learned while still being a fun experience.

What would I do differently? Find a better way to assign grades. I gave the same grade to everyone on each team—80 for the first team out, 85 for the next team out, etc. The grades were high, much higher than students would have received on a 100-question midterm. But if one team member did all the work, or one kept quiet and didn’t contribute, the grades were not an accu-

Thinking Outside of the Box

By Virginia Freed, Bay Path College, MA
 vfreed@baypath.edu

I hesitate to use “Thinking Outside of the Box” as the title, because I know how the trite phrase rankles me when I hear others use it. The irony in using the cliché is always patent: in doing so, those who do, aren’t. But in this case the title refers to a literal box and how said box can stimulate real student thinking about learning.

I bring this box (sometimes it’s a bag) to the first class of a new semester—the activity works especially well in any course enrolling beginning students. The idea for the box is not original to me; in truth, I cannot remember where I read about it. Over the years, however, I have discovered its applications far exceed simply generating discussion among students.

At precisely the time class starts, I walk into the room with my box filled with random, quirky objects. I like to include a small Alf doll, a pad of Post-its, some scissors, perhaps a can of Slim-Fast, a candle, a rock, a comb, and maybe six or seven other objects indiscriminately gathered as I leave for class. As soon as I enter the room, I put the box on the table; take each article out; place it on the table; and finally, when all of them are out, return them to the box. Then I ask the students to take out a piece of paper and write down as many of the items as they can remember.

Interesting things begin to happen here, and I can make some immediate points about classroom expectations. Students sitting in the back of the room have not been able to see the items on the table. The point? Sit as close to the front of the room as possible. Some students have been engaged in conversations and did not see me or the box. The point? Pay attention right from the beginning of the class; professors often offer the most interesting and important information at the beginning and ending of class. Some students come in late. The point? Arrive on time. Some students don’t have anything to write with or on. The point? Come prepared. We discuss all this with humor, but the inferences are clear.

Now that I have everyone’s attention, I repeat the process, slowly taking each item out one by one, placing it on the table, then returning them all to the box and asking students to list as many as they can remember. As expected, everyone lists more the second time around. The obvious advantage of paying attention is illustrated. We notice that the most frequently remembered items are those that came out first and last, so we talk about the advantages of studying in shorter stints rather than in marathon sessions. Before proceeding, they determine how many items are in the box by sharing their lists with each other and pooling the items.

When the exercise is repeated yet again, everyone gets even more of the items. This time we talk about each item as it is taken out and put back. This, too, aids their ability to recall, because using another of the five senses is an important technique for remembering the contents. Through this process we note similarities to learning any kind of content: simple repetition helps; verbalizing material they are trying to master helps; noting the total range of material helps when they are learning it in smaller chunks; talking about it with others helps. All this is, of course, fundamentally obvious, but isn’t the obvious what we often miss?

The assignment for the next class is to find a way to remember all of the box’s contents. Foolish? Unrelated to actual course content? Maybe, maybe not. To many students, the material they are required to learn for basic psychology or biology or history can seem as disconnected and random as the items in the box, and yet they must find ways to place it in a context, make it relevant, and retain it. When they come to the second class, many have somehow managed to remember the 15 or so items. And all have improved their recall from the first class.

We discuss their methods for mastering the contents. Some have grouped them alphabetically; some, by color; some, by use, e.g., grooming items, desk items, toy items; and some have created a narrative. The

number of approaches they devise is always astonishing, and they love to share and hear how everyone else has accomplished the task. They capture so much from these discussions that at any point during the semester I can ask, “Anyone still able to list all the items in the box?” and most can. So, yes, this is an excellent first-day-of-class icebreaker: it clearly gives everyone in the room a common focus in a nonthreatening way. Its benefits, however, go way beyond that to real conversations about how to learn in this new, strange academic environment. Now that, boys and girls, is truly thinking outside of the box. ♥

VOCABULARY TESTS

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rate account of their knowledge. I need to find a way to make the grades more personalized. I debated averaging their two competition scores together, but that doesn’t really stop the inflated grades. So, this semester, I am going to try averaging each competition grade with the three vocabulary quizzes that precede it. If they do well on the individual quizzes, they should be ready for the competition. If they don’t, they will get a grade lower than their team members and, hopefully, an incentive to do better on the next three quizzes! And that’s my final answer. ♥

McGraw-Hill and Magna Publications Scholarly Work on Teaching and Learning Award

McGraw-Hill and *The Teaching Professor* (Magna Publications, Inc.) have joined forces to create an award that recognizes exemplary scholarly work on teaching and learning. The first award with its accompanying stipend of \$1,000 will be given at the 2009 *Teaching Professor* Conference, June 5-7 in Washington, D.C. To nominate authors for this award, visit <http://www.teachingprofessor.com/conference/teachingandlearningaward.html>

When Teachers are ‘Present’

“Without presence, teachers are like guides in a theme park who tell the same joke a dozen times a day. We’re there, but we’re not there. With presence, teaching lives, it may or may not be good teaching, but it’s alive.” (p. 215) Jerry Farber makes this observation in the opening paragraphs of a “commentary” on teaching and presence.

Presence, as he defines it, is not poise or confidence but the sense of *immediacy*, *openness*, and *spontaneity* a teacher brings to the classroom. This kind of presence is elusive, easily eroded by repetition. And there’s a great deal of repetition and sameness in teaching—the same pieces of literature, fundamental readings, problems, basic concepts, underlying questions, and foundational facts that teachers must get through year after year. A carefully crafted set of questions can lead to a stimulating, provocative, and memorable discussion. But use those same questions four or five times and their intellectual edginess dulls. Farber describes what happens this way, “Questions and answers become merely instruments. We’re not *really* asking and we’re not *really* listening. We’re like travelers keeping one eye on the map and another on the clock as the countryside blurs by outside the window.” (p. 218)

Even skilled performers do not automatically have presence. Nor is presence

presumed by certain techniques or excluded by others. It is not a case of using active learning and abandoning lecture. “I’ve had more than enough opportunity to observe (and to hear countless reports of) ‘active learning’ sessions that are at least as alienating and unproductive as the droning, read-from-yellowing-notes lecture that is so often invoked as a foil by the people who give the teaching workshops. The problem, as always, is pedagogical mindlessness.” (p. 231) It’s not that Farber is against active learning. His point is simply that teachers can be present or absent when using any approach.

Farber’s article is really about one of the most challenging (and ignored) aspects of teaching—how to keep it fresh and invigorated over time. “When we’re absent, when we’re there but not there, this, in effect, excludes the students, who are reduced to the role of mere onlookers (in lecture) or objects to be manipulated (in ‘class-centered’ activities).” (p. 216)

Is there any way to cultivate this sense of aliveness and vitality in the classroom? Farber suggests three things, none of which involve techniques per se. First, in his experience, he has found presence is more likely if he is unwilling to settle for less. This means he holds “every single class session up to the standard of the best I’ve been able to achieve.” (p. 219)

Second, he recommends being as aware as possible of the people in the room and “how they, collectively and individually, seem to be engaging with what’s going on.” (p. 219)

And finally, Farber believes presence comes when he stays in touch with his own sources of energy for that day and moment. “Presence demands not only that we take account of those people in the classroom with us at this particular moment, but that we take account of this moment in our own life as well. Presence requires that we find our own energy if we hope for the others in the room to find theirs.” (p. 220)

Being present makes us vulnerable. So we wrap ourselves in whatever insulation comes to hand; a formal and forbidding, or even arrogant, manner; an inflexible agenda; a set of props, videos, PowerPoint presentations, whatever, workshop, or other small group activities. . . .” In order to discover these protections that may keep us safe but also prevent presence, Farber suggests we ask of them, “Do they energize the class, give it intensity and focus?” (p. 223)

Reference: Farber, J. (2008). Teaching and presence. *Pedagogy*, 8 (2), 215-225. ♥

Successful Classroom Management

By Jason Ebbeling, Menlo College, CA, and Brian Van Brunt, Western Kentucky University
brian.vanbrunt@wku.edu

Managing students who are disruptive, those who lack motivation and appear as though they would rather be any place than in the classroom, is easier when faculty take the right stance. Anything is possible when faculty have faith in the students they teach. Learning starts with a dedicated teacher interested in meeting the challenge of how to present content in a way

that successfully navigates the barriers students erect.

Believing in students is the right stance, but it doesn’t prevent students from coming to class unprepared, handing in assignments late, asking for exceptions, and talking in class. The principles of Motivational Enhancement Therapy, originally developed by W.R. Miller and S. Rollnick to help college professionals engage students with drinking problems, offer strategies that faculty can use with disruptive students in class. Each of the four principles described below has the professor

acknowledging the problem and then working with the student to develop a plan to correct the problem. It’s an approach built on collaboration.

Express empathy—The professor communicates with the students from a position of power, but the professor still respects the student and practices active listening. Despite the power associated with being the professor, the teacher recognizes that the behavior that needs to be changed can be changed only by the student.

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How Blended Learning Works

By Jeffery Galle, Oxford College, Emory University, GA
jgalle@emory.edu

I took apart the first watch my parents bought me as a birthday present. As I remember it, I was more curious than perverse. I have always liked seeing how things work, how they are put together, in order to grasp the possibilities of design and function. Much later as a university professor, I wanted to see and experience just how technology could be used to make online assignments work. Attending various workshops in the university's teaching center gave me some sense of the potential for using technology as a pedagogical tool. However, it was not until this summer at Oxford College of Emory University, when I helped lead a track on blended learning (for liberal arts faculty), that I experienced a sort of epiphany of new possibilities of design and function through this pedagogy. I saw this pedagogy work across the curriculum as professors of chemistry, biology, foreign languages, music, composition, allied health, and anthropology developed projects for their own classes.

Through the books of people like D. Randy Garrison and from colleagues like David Gowler here at Oxford College, I have begun to explore, analyze, and apply the three distinct phases of the blended learning pedagogy. The phases are the pre-class assignment, the in-class dialogue, and the post-class follow-up. Although these sound pretty conventional, what is new and powerful is that the online assignments and the in-class work do not run on parallel tracks; rather, the online assignment and the face time in class can be integrated in some very profound ways.

1. Online learning (OLL) and the pre-class assignment

In my experience, many students today approach out-of-class assignments either halfheartedly or with complete neglect. The online (out-of-class) assignments designed for blended learning speak to students through a wide variety of con-

texts. The asynchronous pre-class assignment is always online and always seeks to initiate feedback from the students and the instructor. The online assignment may ask students to respond to a given passage, an audio or video file, a chart, or a rubric. The response can employ a blog or a wiki or another of the fine features of Blackboard (or other software designed for these purposes). The instructor evaluates the knowledge and/or skill of the students *before* class and incorporates this knowledge into the class discussion. I'll have more to say shortly about the nature of the pre-class assignment.

2. The face-to-face (FTF) class time

Building on what students conveyed in the online assignment, the instructor can structure the synchronous learning through Socratic discussion, a lab, or traditional lecture. But the content of the FTF can vary, given the knowledge level of students. This means that valuable class time can be used for learning. The gap between course content and the precise level of student knowledge has been at least partially bridged through the use of online assignments, feedback, and the responsive presentation of course content.

3. The post-class follow-up

To confirm that learning has occurred both before and during class, the instructor can construct a brief online assignment that calls on the students to demonstrate some knowledge of the work just covered. That online feedback allows the instructor to plan more effectively for the next class meeting and future online assignments.

Refinements can be added to these basics at each step along the way. In the first phase, OLL may occur with greater depth if the assignment involves a central course concept that the instructor generally repeats over and over again. In this way, students can return to the "basic concepts" out of class as the need arises. Second, the nature of the instructor's feedback can be supplemented by having the students alternate reading and responding to the

pre-class assignment, which gets the basic topics out in the intellectual atmosphere before class, thereby saving class time. Third, in the follow-up and construction of the next assignment, those who are "getting it" can lead the class discussion online as the instructor spends more fruitful time constructing the next out-of-class online assignment.

The *blended* part of blended learning is the key additional component of this pedagogy as the online work and class-time work of students and professors are better integrated. This integration has become the signature trait of the blended learning described in the rapidly growing literature and through such pedagogically focused entities as EDUCAUSE and the Sloan Consortium.

The rapid adoption of this pedagogy, as our experience attests, signals the widespread usefulness of the concepts. I certainly appreciated the successful efforts of a wide array of professors applying the blended learning process in distinct ways to their own courses. Among all the different disciplines, courses, and applications, the commonly shared idea was to use the online assignment, the feedback, and the follow-up to focus upon actual student knowledge and student learning by using the Internet, the students' second home. ♥

PARTICIPATORY SEMINAR

FROM PAGE 6

public display and open discussion. The result is a lively seminar in which most students ask questions, pose ideas, and actively discuss controversial issues. The effect of having every student *present* every week is that every student is truly *present* every week—interested, engaged, with a "stake" in the proceedings. We and our students learn a great deal in these seminars and find that far from dozing through another long and boring paper, our evenings are filled with the excitement of exploring new material, debating important ideas, and finishing ahead of the bell! ♥

The Truly Participatory Seminar

By Sarah M. Leupen and Edward H. Burt, Jr., Ohio Wesleyan University
smleupen@owu.edu

In typical upper-division seminars, each week, one student leads 10 to 15 classmates in a discussion of an important research paper in the field or presents his or her own work to the group. Students not presenting are supposed to participate in the discussion but rarely do, despite professorial queries aimed at generating a lively, provocative exchange. Seminars using this format can be deadly dull. We decided to tackle the problem and would like to share our ideas for more interactive, exciting, and educationally enriched exchanges in seminars.

The most important change we made was to have *every* student present *every* week in one of three formats: one minute (approximately seven students per week), five minutes (three to four students per week), or 15 minutes (two students per week). In one minute, students present an idea or introduce an organism (we teach biology) that illustrates the topic of the week. Time for questions following the one-minute presentation is unlimited. In five minutes, students are expected to present a more detailed, literature-based per-

spective on the topic with, again, unlimited time for questions.

The 15-minute category is closest to the “traditional” paper presentation on a designated topic. One week before presentation, each presenter must provide a copy of the paper or post it on the seminar website for the rest of the class and faculty. After the paper is available, every student in the seminar must post one or more open-ended questions about the paper on the seminar website at least 48 hours before the class meets. The student presenter is expected to address these questions in the presentation. After the 15-minute presentation, there is unlimited time for questions raised in the seminar. Inevitably, and delightfully, we find that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Without any puppet-string pulling by us, biological themes emerge from each seminar meeting. These flesh out the week’s topic and unite the individual presentations.

We enforce time limits stringently, using a bell to warn students when they approach the limit. When the time is up, one of us begins to ring the bell furiously, thereby drowning all conversation. As soon as the student stops, we proceed to questions. We make the bell ringing some-

thing of a show, thereby adding enough levity to relax the atmosphere and provide a bit of amusement. Nonetheless, the bell does effectively end the presentation.

The format ensures that all students come prepared and that all participate in the presentations and join in the discussions that follow. We use the number of questions each student asks during the seminar as an additional measure of participation and remind students that the quality of their questions is also a factor.

Finally, instead of writing a paper read only by the instructor, each student prepares a poster for presentation at a general session on the last evening of the seminar. During the first hour of the seminar, half the students stand with their posters while the instructors and half the students wander about listening to each presentation and asking questions. During the second hour, the students switch roles and we repeat the process.

Throughout the semester we emphasize participation by having students post preliminary questions to a seminar website, by having students present something at every meeting of the seminar, and by having all students prepare a poster for

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CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

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Develop discrepancy—Students are motivated to change when they perceive a discrepancy between where they are and where they want to be. The professor can make students aware of this discrepancy. “You want an A in this course and yet you are regularly losing points by not being in class to take the quizzes.” “You want to be a successful manager and yet you fall asleep whenever you lose interest. What’s going to happen when the staff meetings you’re required to attend get boring?”

Avoid argumentation—Arguing with students only makes them more resistant. It is highly unlikely that the professor is

going to persuade a student (whether that student needs to come to class or get work done on time). A more indirect approach may be better. “When you miss class, you are wasting money. You pay for each class and get nothing when you aren’t there.”

Roll with resistance—Don’t meet it head on. Invite the student to think about the problem differently. Rather than imposing a solution, see if the student might not be able to generate one. “You missed the assignment. What’s a fair consequence for that?”

College professors aren’t law enforcement officers. They aren’t expected to be entertainers or hand-holders. They do have the responsibility to create a classroom setting that engages students and fosters rela-

tionships based on mutual respect. Students should not IM in class or arrive late or hungover any more than professors should show up the minute class begins, lecture, and leave promptly when it’s over. Learning occurs when both work together, treading softly on differences and celebrating strengths.

For more on this topic, join Jason Ebbeling and Brian Van Brunt for their Magna Online Seminar “Classroom Management 101: Working with Difficult Students” on October 14. For information, go to <http://www.magnapubs.com/calendar/241.html>.