



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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TAP-ping Our Resources: Learning from Teaching Analysis Polls

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As a Graduate Student Associate, I have been privileged to learn how colleagues teach in a variety of disciplines throughout the University. In conducting Teaching Analysis Polls for many colleagues, I have found deep affinities across disciplines in terms of what makes for effective teaching—and, fortunately, that many of us at the University actually do these things. Not surprisingly, many of us also face similar difficulties in the eyes of our pupils, and I share here both our successes and students' ongoing concerns in order to prompt further reflection within the teaching community. This indicates just how much we can learn from student evaluation and classroom assessment, and how much students know about what makes teaching effective.

In response to the question "What helps you to learn?", students replied, "Practical examples" in a resounding chorus. When I pressed them as to why examples were helpful, students gave a variety of thoughtful answers: they see the principles under discussion in action, examples give them the opportunity to apply the material, and they provide a tangible vocabulary from which students can proceed to more abstract principles. Practical examples are not a substitute for theory, but rather a way students can initially engage with and appropriate complex conceptual material.

Secondly, a majority of students find small group work helpful for their learning. Small groups provide alternative avenues of participation and make possible different types of classroom discussion. When students move from small to large groups, they may present results or ask questions of other students, thereby opening a variety of large group discussion formats. While small groups need not be used at all times, students recognize their value in increasing the quality and variety of discussion sections as a whole.

Two impediments to learning surface across disciplines in Teaching Analysis Polls. First, organization and presentation of materials are often the greatest impediments to learning. Students new to a discipline often have little idea how to ask questions, or which ideas are truly important. They often suggest outlining the goals and expectations of assignments and giving questions to guide their reading to

help overcome these difficulties. This issue is often a challenge precisely because we are so immersed in our specialties that connections and issues stand out for us in ways that are not apparent to our students.

A second issue is the difficulty and relevance of secondary, "critical" essays. Students often find these to be boring, confusing, or irrelevant. Suffice it to say that their most common solution to this problem—"Get rid of the articles!"—is unsatisfactory from an instructor's perspective. Teaching students critical reading skills and the work constitutive of normal academic inquiry are both valuable pedagogical goals that inform these tasks. We as an academic community need to think about how we can effectively convey the import and significance of these materials to our students in ways that will help them to see the value of detailed work within a particular academic discipline.