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Torturing Our Students, Torturing Ourselves

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Torturing Our Students, Torturing Ourselves

It’s that time of the semester again: papers to grade, tests to devise, projects to oversee. Who did this to me? Oh, yeah—I did it to myself. I sat down in the heat of August and wrote my syllabi, and for some reason, I decided to torture myself when the first week of October came.

If we are feeling this kind of pressure, how do our students feel? I joke with my students that the faculty all get together and gang up on each student: “Okay, who has Kelsey? How can we make her life totally miserable?” (An unsigned editorial in last week’s Johnsonian made the same point—they’re on to us!)

Actually, the student or students who wrote that editorial came to this conclusion about why we are treating our students this way: “There is a reason your teachers push you the way they do. They want you to leave Winthrop feeling good about what you have done and ready to go into the real world.” Ah, wise and perceptive words! How refreshing to hear a student say that.

I know that when I was a student, I approached papers and tests and projects only as hurdles to be jumped as I hurried toward my real goal: passing the class and moving on to the next required course, which in itself was just another hurdle. I generally did not see tests, papers, and projects as learning opportunities. I imagine it is the rare student who does—without some help from us.

Even sadder, when I first started teaching, I treated the required parts of the courses I was teaching just as hurdles for my students to jump. I had to have them write something, so I assigned a paper. I had to test them, so I made up a test, the best I could, with little or no training in test-making.

It took me a few years of teaching to realize that these course requirements were not merely hurdles (though they are indeed partly that), but they were also, and mainly, important learning opportunities. A paper analyzing a Hawthorne short story or a test on Hamlet should actually be the culmination of student learning about those texts, as well as part of the student’s ongoing learning how to write about literature. A test, even a multiple choice or true/false test, should require deep, critical thinking, thinking that not only demonstrates mastery, but also assimilates learning. I began to make paper assignments more carefully, to devise tests with more thought—and then to try to communicate to my students that the paper, test, or project was an important learning opportunity. Sometimes that message does not get through, but it does to a good number of students. It took my realization of the deep value of assignments and my subsequent attitude...
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change to get that process moving. When the papers and tests come in, it is still a chore to evaluate them, but the task is a bit easier and much more rewarding when I know, and the students know, that we are putting ourselves through this torture for a good reason, for the best of reasons. Treating course assignments as real learning opportunities makes them real, makes the learning real, makes the course real. Really! (Unfortunately, the grading is still all too real, but that is another story.)

Academic Responsibility – Advising

Last spring, we adopted new guidelines that grew out of the Faculty Roles and Rewards Taskforce, a document entitled “Faculty Roles”; I would like to take this space for a few weeks to start a discussion about some aspects of one part of that document, academic responsibility. I wrote previously about final exams, office hours, faculty governance, FERPA, and professional development. This week: academic advising.

The Faculty Roles document cites “academic registration support” as one of our responsibilities. I take that to mean academic advising. We have a responsibility to our students to provide them with accurate and timely advising, especially in the upcoming period when they are choosing their spring semester courses. Wingspan and DegreeWorks make that job easier than it used to be, but electronic resources cannot replace an educated brain and a sensitive, caring ear.

Some of us are better academic advisors than others, just by our natures, but we can all train ourselves to be knowledgeable about curriculum and programs of study—and that is one of most important services to our students.

We also have the responsibility of helping students with academic and, to some extent, personal problems. I look back at some moments of counseling (and even intervention) as some of the most rewarding of my teaching career.

So when you put out the call to your advisees to come see you to choose courses for the next semester, and when you slap that sign-up sheet on your door, remember what an important part of your job academic advising is, and how valuable it is to our students and to our university.
XXITE 2.0 ------ The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and technology. You’ll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at http://wuxxite.ning.com/

Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu

The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor’s request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don’t want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Thought for The Week

“When in doubt, tell the truth. This will gratify some people, and astonish the rest.”

-Mark Twain

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