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Oh What a Mistake We Make When We Assume We Know What Our Students Know How To Do...and What To Do About It

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Oh What a Mistake We Make When We Assume We Know What Our Students Know How To Do...and What To Do About It

I sat down to write the *Weekly Reader* on Tuesday, but I had no ideas. So I just did some other work and trusted that an idea would come. Then things started happening.

Yesterday in the West Center men's faculty locker room, Greg Oakes told me, "I've become a convert to the John Bird critical reading system." I was gratified, of course, especially when he said his students in HMXP are finding critical reading very helpful. I told him I can't imagine that students could understand some of the dense readings in the Human Experience class without annotating what they read.

Later in the day, I got an email from Faculty Focus, an email newsletter about teaching and learning that I recommend highly. MaryEllen Weimer was writing about note-taking skills, with some research results and some innovative suggestions about a skill we probably take for granted.

Then this morning, Katarina Moyon forwarded to me, Gloria Jones, and Amanda Hiner the weekly email from Rick Reis at Tomorrow's Professor, another very good email newsletter, this week advice for high school students from a college English professor, about the importance of reading as preparation for college.

So clearly I am being sent signals from the universe that I should return to the topic of critical reading and add notetaking skills. I think we as instructors assume that students have already mastered these essential skills. But as so often happens with assumptions...

First, the note taking. MaryEllen Weimer recommends an interesting strategy:

"I'm always on the lookout for strategies that develop students' note-taking skills, and economics professor Mark Maier shares a good one in the recent issue of *College Teaching*. He assigns a

'rotating note taker' in his courses. This student serves as the class note-taker, posting his or her notes on the course management system before the next class session. The notes are graded pass/fail and count for 1 percent of the final course grade. If it's a fail, the student learns why and is assigned another day to take and post class notes."

Maier reports a number of benefits from this approach. Here is a link to her posting, which will also let you subscribe to her newsletter: <http://tinyurl.com/jgw9p6w>

Weimer then cites several sources suggesting students learn more from taking notes by hand than by using a laptop or other device. Studies show that writing notes in longhand forces students to summarize and process more clearly, rather than taking verbatim notes, which they are more apt to do when writing on a device. Very interesting.

I think we might need to

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back up even more. In my classes, I see very few of the students taking notes, and when I observe other people's classes, I notice the same thing. Many of my students will not take notes unless I explicitly tell them to. "You should take some notes on this," I say, then they sigh and pull out pen and paper. Something I used to take for granted now has to be made explicit. They are not apt to be good at a skill that they are not doing.

Similarly, I used to take critical reading for granted. I assumed, incorrectly, that my students were critically reading their assignments for class. I can't remember when I wrote the first version of the two-page handout, "How to Read Critically," but it must have been in the late 80s, since I advised the students to "turn off your Walkman." I can trace the evolution of that handout by its change from Walkman to iPod to smart phone. Who knows what's next? Skull implants?

That handout begins, "The key to success in college, in all courses, in all disciplines, is critical reading." I really believe those words are true, and I have seen students make so much progress when they have mastered the skill of critical reading:

annotating their texts by underlining and writing key words in the margins.

I used to assume that students would read the handout then begin reading critically. Another wrong assumption. On the TLC webpage, under "Resources," I recorded a screencast explaining what we need to do to get students to read critically. The handout is also available there as a .pdf—or I will send you a Word version if you want to modify it (email me for that). And the link:

<http://www.winthrop.edu/tlc/default.aspx?id=32084>

The article in Tomorrow's Professor cites research about the effect of deep reading (what I call critical reading) on readiness for and success in college. Students who love to read and who can read critically are more successful in all their courses, even math. You can subscribe to the newsletter by following this link:

<http://tinyurl.com/2ekrcrd>

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beat them over the head with it! But critical reading will only be fully integrated when students encounter it in all their classes. If I had the power, I would require that we all emphasize it. Alas, I am not yet Emperor of Winthrop, so I can only strongly suggest it.

And we are beginning to evangelize for critical reading and critical thinking beyond Winthrop's walls. As I did last year, at the request of Katarina Moyon, who coordinates HMXP, I will be going later this month to Rock Hill High to talk to students about critical reading. Amanda Hiner, who coordinates CRTW, has been really busy, delivering a keynote address at Duke Energy in Charlotte, and she has presented focal sessions at the International Critical Thinking Conference in Berkeley, a very big and important conference. And she has more coming. Critical reading, thinking, and writing is not just a required course in our curriculum: it is at the heart of our students' experience. We are on our way to being what Amanda Hiner, Jack DeRochi, Gregg Hecimovich, Gloria Jones, Jo Koster, Evelyne Weeks, and I envisioned long ago: THE Critical Thinking University.

Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a 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 (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

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and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Register for a TLC Session
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The 4th Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Watch this space for information about the 4th Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning. The call for papers and proposals will be coming soon!

Thought For the Week

"Life does not consist mainly--or even largely--of facts and happenings. It consists mainly of the storm of thoughts that is forever blowing through one's head."
--Mark Twain