

# THE MANTLE

*Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

## When Should Teaching Be Discussed?

by Johnny W. Lott, Director

As faculty members unpack curricula for 2009-10, think about assignments, write syllabi and goals for classes, and in general prepare for the teaching and learning of new students, it is appropriate to discuss when and how to talk about teaching and issues surrounding it on this campus. Discussions should occur not only when faculty members read student course evaluations or when some review panel is coming to visit campus. It is my contention that good teaching should be an integral part of what we do and discuss on a regular basis at all levels on campus.

This contention is not written lightly. Consider the *Guidelines for Effective University Teaching*, Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC), Canberra (1993). Two of this document's many pertinent parts are the institutional valuing of teaching and how chairs and deans can aid in the valuing of teaching. We can learn from this document and I quote shamelessly from it in the following.

"Institutional ethos and climate influence the status of teaching within the institution and the quality of the students' learning environments" (AVCC). If there is an institutional priority commitment to teaching and learning as suggested, some ways that it either is or can be shown by the administration include the following:

- mission statement containing the educational ethos of the institution;
- administrative practices concerning services supporting teaching;
- adequate resources for effective teaching and learning,

and assurance of effective resource use to achieve desired educational outcomes;

- allocation of responsibilities allowing staff time for student consultation and conducting teaching as a scholarly activity instead of as a routine task;
- policies on academic appointments encouraging the recruitment of individuals with demonstrated teaching commitment, and on tenure and promotion giving teaching parity with research;
- policies on matters affecting student learning opportunities, including assessment and supervision of postgraduate students and graduate instructors;
- policies addressing ethical issues concerning abuse of power and rights to intellectual property;
- professional experience, study leave programs, or internships allowing a focus on teaching, course design, teaching materials and curriculum development;
- professional development programs assisting staff in enhancing teaching roles, particularly for those new to teaching;
- availability of funds for exploring, developing and implementing approaches to teaching aimed at



*Dr. Johnny W. Lott*

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# Developing Relationships Helps My Teaching

by Johnny W. Lott, Director

Laura A. Williams, Department of Management, in her fourth year in the doctoral program, at the University of Mississippi won the Graduate Instructor Award for Teaching Excellence for 2008-9. Ms. Williams exemplifies outstanding teaching, a major qualification for the award. One of Ms. Williams' students wrote, "The kindness, patience and excellence exhibited in both her teaching style and personal conduct make her an ideal and suitable candidate."

Laura worked as an auditor for Hospital Corporation of America before graduate school. This work allowed her to interact with many people at various levels within the organization and provided her good stories to enhance her teaching. Her students recognize her story-telling abilities in making class come alive. She also tries to help her students understand linkages between personal experiences and those to be faced in later careers because she believes making connections between current experiences and future work can help them succeed.

Ms. Williams reflected on role model teachers from preschool through college who helped her become the classroom teacher she is. Notably, Charles Frasier, chair of the Accounting Department at Lipscomb University, taught Laura's first collegiate business class and was instrumental in her change of major to business with accounting as a second major. His classes were challenging; he made work light-hearted, gave encouragement, and taught her that business could be exciting. Examples from both his CPA firm and



Laura Williams

work experiences made class realistic. "He knew his students. You felt like he was interested in you."

When asked whether her role model teachers did things that could be done here, she says, "Lipscomb has class sizes of about 25 students; faculty members commonly host cookouts for students. With the University of Mississippi classes being bigger, the same personal investment is not as easy." However, Ms. Williams says, "Students here still notice when teachers care about them and know them. Further, when you know something about your students and they know you care, the less likely they are to be difficult and confrontational; they come to discuss class assignments; they say thank you for good classes."

When asked about her teaching style, Williams says students describe her as a chameleon with no formula or set pattern for classes. That does not mean a lack of planning. Ms. Williams says, "I don't do anything in class without a purpose and a meaning." She has suggestions for others:

- Set high student expectations and clearly communicate them.
- Challenge students to "experience" class concepts through mock situations and problem-solving experiences.
- Relate topics to concepts from earlier classes; help students make connections to see the big picture.
- Have a laundry list of class needs; prioritize the "must do" and "nice to do" items.
- Allow students to decide (with instructor help) what is important in class.
- Be creative; try something new; have a back-up plan if something does not work.
- Recognize and set boundaries for teaching and research.

This is pretty sound advice from a young graduate instructor who may be a role model for future professors in her classes.

## Teaching Resources

**Faculty Development Luncheon, August 31, 2009** Dr. Pedro Noguera: "Creating the Schools We Need: A Broader and Bolder Approach to Reform". Call 1391 for a reservation before August 27, 2009.

*Faculty Focus* provides free online materials for those who sign up. If you choose to join, go to <http://www.facultyfocus.com/about/> and look for details. One of the newest publications is "Strategies for Teaching Large Classes." If a member, it can be seen at [http://www.facultyfocus.com/private/pdf\\_products/report\\_8.pdf](http://www.facultyfocus.com/private/pdf_products/report_8.pdf).

Also because many of you use Blackboard and have student collaborative projects, see "Student Collaboration in the Online Classroom." If a member, it can be seen at [http://www.facultyfocus.com/private/pdf\\_products/report\\_15.pdf](http://www.facultyfocus.com/private/pdf_products/report_15.pdf).

If you do not choose to join, come by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to preview a copy of either report.

# Psychological Factors that Impact Academic Achievement: Fixed Mindsets

by Susan Mossing, Assistant Director

Do you believe that intelligence is limited by genetics or that level of achievement is determined by the amount of talent possessed? Do you believe that students who are more intelligent or talented do not have to work as hard, and, conversely that students who work hard must not be intelligent or talented? Research into these questions generates ideas for our work as university teachers. This article considers fixed versus growth mindsets.

Over the past few years, my students have surprised me with their overwhelming affirmative responses that genetics limits intelligence and talent limits achievements. However, considering the value society places in IQ scores and aptitude tests, there should be no surprises here. Furthermore, misguided self-esteem training (praising a child for looking smart) makes children vulnerable to developing a “fixed mindset” (Dweck, 2007). So what are the repercussions of a fixed mindset?

A fixed mindset promotes impression management--the need to look smart. While not necessarily bad, it can lead to avoiding challenge (and growth). For example, students with a fixed mindset would rather do problems already mastered than challenge themselves with more difficult questions. Self-handicapping falls into the realm of impression management as well. Self-handicapping is defined as “any action or choice of performance setting that enhances the opportunity to externalize (or excuse) failure and to internalize (reasonably accept credit for) success” (Berglas & Jones, p. 406, 1978). An example of student self-handicapping behavior is buying textbooks late in a semester and attributing poor test performance to not having the books.

Students with a fixed mindset do not ask for help. Asking for help is admitting intellectual deficiency. Furthermore, students with a fixed mindset are less likely to take advantage of additional help sessions or other resources. These students avoid being seen as intellectually deficient even at the cost of their academic careers.

People with a fixed mindset do not believe they should have to work hard. Smart students do not have to work; work compensates for a lack of intelligence. Students with a fixed

mindset do not allow themselves the luxury of learning. They believe they already know the answers and they should not make mistakes. A fixed mindset is the “kiss of death” for students.

This discussion begs the questions: Where do we go from here? What can we do for students who will not accept our help? The answer lies with the growth mindset. People with a growth mindset believe that there is no innate limitation on their successes; their successes are the result of challenge, learning, and hard work.

Faculty can define courses to exemplify a growth mindset. The first step is to consider personal mindsets. Mindsets affect how you live your life and how you interact with your students. Do you allow for mistakes and treat them as teachable moments? Do you give feedback to students, provide them with formative evaluations, and allow them to learn from their mistakes? Do you reward students for the gains they make or penalize them for their mistakes? Considering these questions, you can generate ideas that might work for you and your class.

For help with class development using growth mindsets, make an appointment with the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. For current research regarding the myth of giftedness and its impact on thoughts and behaviors, see the references.

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## Teaching Tips

Teaching tips abound on the Internet. One site found with several gems is

<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/teachtip.htm>.

This site was created by the Honolulu Community College, is a collection of many different sources, and has hints that could be helpful on issues from syllabus making; to 101 things you can do in the first three weeks of class; to icebreakers that can be used to start classes. Pick and choose carefully but look for the gems you need.

# Developing a Continuous Process for Assurance of Learning: School of Business Administration Model

by Tony Ammeter, Kate Kellum and Milorad Novicevic

The School of Business Administration is refining its process for Assurance of Learning (AOL), as it seeks re-affirmation of accreditation by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). This AOL is similar to, yet distinct from, the institutional effectiveness or assessment in SACS. AOL focuses on student learning asking “what are students learning in our programs?” rather than “what is faculty teaching in classes?” Learning outcomes and teaching output are connected, but AOL focuses on creating a formal linkage between what students retain when they leave the program and needed adjustments to the program for future students. The goal behind any adjustments is to bring program learning objectives (what we want students to learn) in line with what students actually learn.

The continuous process of feeding data back to make effective change occurs naturally in individual classes. As faculty, when we review test results and find that a specific concept was not grasped by a large number of students, we review that concept with students. This process also occurs when a student recognizes a misunderstood concept because of “bombing that question” and seeks to re-learn the concept.

While AOL ultimately has an impact on learning outcomes from each class lesson, such a detailed level is not where the process begins. AOL begins globally with the School’s Mission statement; that is, faculty ask what we want our graduates to look like in terms of learned competencies and then work backwards to the development of general and discipline-specific student learning goals and outcomes. For example, the Mission statement might include to “recognize and analyze ethical dilemmas, use critical ethical reasoning to generate alternative remedies, rank these remedies, and propose a prac-

tical course of action,” and the resulting discipline specific student goal is to “evaluate the financial position of a company from the balance sheets, cash flow statements, and budgets.”

Student learning objectives flow into the curriculum, from learning goals for programs, to learning goals in specific classes, down to specific lessons and, ultimately, to measures that assess students’ achievement. While learning goals flow down from the school to individual lessons and taught content flows up from the lesson to the school outcomes, AOL and assessment focus on what program graduates know and can do.

Clear valid measures are critical to the effectiveness of the AOL process; without these, there is no way to tell if what is learned deviates from what is supposed to be learned. Also without these measures to show how far away from the target a program or class is, there is no way to “close the loop” with changes to get to the target. These measures may take many forms and be in different settings. For example, multiple program faculty may evaluate performance on a question embedded into a course final to determine whether the majority of students demonstrate evolved ethical reasoning, or faculty may evaluate performance on an ethical reasoning project required in a capstone class using a rubric.

Importantly, faculty members are the only constituents with appropriate knowledge to use AOL data to make adjustments. Crucially, while the majority of the measures of AOL do not necessarily occur in their classes, they are valuable sources of determining what needs to be learned by the students. Every faculty member may ask the question “If the way I am teaching does not impact on what we want the students to learn, why am I teaching that way?” The information is gleaned through the continuous process of Assurance of Learning.

# Multiple Choice and Critical Thinking Are Not Mutually Exclusive

by Nancy Wiggers, Learning Specialist

Critical thinking skills are at the core of student learning in higher education. Traditionally critical thinking skills are identified with Bloom's hierarchy or levels of learning. The first two levels, remembering and understanding, concern attaining and comprehending information. The second two, applying and analyzing, address altering the information through deduction and inference, and the last two, evaluating and creating involve generating new information. A challenge for instructors is gathering evidence that such thinking is taking place.

Educational evidence is typically provided via assessment with better assessment providing better evidence. Creating quality assessments hinges upon validity and reliability. In a classroom context, however, practicality is an important concern as well.

Assessment of critical thinking normally involves writing papers and projects. While excellent, they require much time to evaluate and frequently prove impractical for large classes. As a result, many instructors opt for more practical assessments like multiple-choice tests.

At face value, multiple-choice tests are quite practical and students may answer on Scantron sheets which allow fast grading. However, creating reliable and valid multiple choice tests is quite difficult. When multiple choice tests are not constructed well, results may indicate mastery of something other than course objectives. Most students know how to guess at the right answer, and that knowledge may have nothing to do with course content. Strategies for guessing right answers may include:

- eliminating items that do not match grammatically;
- eliminating the highest and lowest numerical response and concentrating on the middle range of numbers;
- eliminating answers with absolute descriptors such as never and always;
- choosing one of two opposites as the answer; and
- selecting the longest choice.

Properly constructed multiple choice items can provide evidence of students' critical thinking. Consider the following strategies.

- Create a stem that presents the premise of a situation or argument requiring the student to select the correct outcome from a set of probable outcomes.
- Create an analogy in which students must determine the relationship between two items.
- Present a brief case study from which to base several multiple choice items.
- Present a partial scenario, requiring students to select the missing component from a set of probable components.
- Present a problem with a possible solution requiring students to evaluate the quality of the solution based upon some predetermined criteria.

All these suggestions involve higher order thinking skills provided that students have neither seen nor discussed the items prior to the test.

Distractors are equally as important as the correct answer for assessment, and the same care should be devoted to constructing these as to the correct answer. Though each distractor should be incorrect; each should have the appearance of possibility. Creating distractors requires considering the concepts being assessed and typical sources for errors or confusion. Properly constructed distractors may provide instructors insight into areas of misunderstandings based upon students' selection.

Good multiple choice tests, carefully planned and with appropriate distractors, can measure critical thinking. They can be one part of a course assessment in the needed arsenal to measure critical thinking. Let's not make our multiple choice tests and critical thinking be mutually exclusive.

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## When Should Teaching Be Discussed? continued from Front Cover

improvement of student learning;

- publications describing effective teaching and learning environments within the institution;
- mechanisms for identifying and funding learning enhancement strategies;
- review of new and existing courses ensuring that programs of study are coherent, and provide students with learning experiences described in university goals;
- procedures for contributions from students and external groups in developing teaching and learning practices and designing or reviewing courses;
- empowerment of faculty for reviewing and changing institutional practices related to the quality of teaching and learning and managing change.

For deans and department heads to encourage faculty to be better teachers, the following are suggested by the AVCC:

- initiating regular discussions and reviews of teaching, learning and assessment, involving stakeholders including external people;
- reviewing regularly all teaching and learning and recognizing and providing assistance needed to develop understanding of teaching strategies and learning processes;
- providing opportunities and incentives for staff, both full-

time and part-time, to develop knowledge and skills in teaching diverse groups of students and their learning processes;

- assisting new faculty in teaching by providing induction into the teaching ethos of the university and by giving them a reduced teaching load to enable them to develop skills, appointing a departmental mentor, and providing professional development opportunities;
- encouraging collaborative development of courses and investigations of innovative ways of teaching and assessing and by making available time and resources to individuals and teams;
- supporting staff who seek promotion on the basis of excellent teaching;
- encouraging research into teaching and learning within the disciplinary or professional context; and
- providing appropriate role models for academic staff.

It is a goal of this Center to help in any possible way to achieve some of the admirable suggestions outlined by Australian colleagues in 1993.

### References

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. *Guidelines for Effective University Teaching*. Accessed August 4, 2009, from [http://www.osds.uwa.edu.au/other\\_services/publications/avcc/guidelines](http://www.osds.uwa.edu.au/other_services/publications/avcc/guidelines).