

Crash Course for Faculty Teaching Freshmen in Fall 2010

Academic First Year Experiences, CIELO



Pedagogy: learning from the experts among us

I have been very lucky to work with fabulously skilled teachers-of-freshmen at CSUN. I've learned a thing or two from them. (Disclaimer: I didn't consult these experts before I listed them here. And the lessons I describe here represent what I thought I understood, which may vary significantly from what each expert meant!)

Cynthia Desrochers (Elementary Education; now at the Chancellor's Office) long ago offered the endlessly applicable "Think, Ink, Pair, Share" template for in-class learning: you provide the topic and ask your students to

1. think individually; then
2. write (briefly) individually; then
3. pair up with a classmate to discuss what each wrote; then
4. return to whole-class discussion with redoubled understanding.

Benefits: every student thinks, writes, and talks; the whole-class discussion is now owned by everyone in the room; and everyone has contributed something towards shared understanding. Another great idea from Cynthia: assemble your best teaching strategies on 3 x 5 cards you carry with you whenever you teach. In case of pedagogical emergency (unresponsive class; an unexpected dearth of lecture or presentation material; the dawning realization that the students have totally missed a key point), you consult your cards and change your approach on the spot.

Glenn Omatsu (Asian American Studies; Educational Opportunity Program Bridge Program; coordinator of the Faculty Mentor Program) gives his freshmen two writing tasks:

1. Describe any “bad high school habits” you want to change now that you’re in college
2. Write about how I as your professor can help you if I notice that you are slipping back into the bad habits.

Glenn also has constructed a wonderful icebreaker built around an astonishing list of foods from many cultures. Students work through the list, counting how many foods they know. Then in small groups they add to their list of “what is this food?” The class as a whole completes the list and then—if you and they are up for it—you can help them think and talk about what the exercise has taught them (typically, they might learn about diversity, about the social construction of knowledge, about the limits of what any one person can know, about the benefits of talking to your classmates, about the fact that most everyone does like food....)

Edie Pistolessi (Art) has demonstrated repeatedly, publicly, unforgettably the value of pictures (images, photos, drawings, paintings) and sculptures. You don’t have to be art faculty to benefit from this. Just bring in a relevant picture. Get students to draw or bring them. Use them. Have students talk about them. Ask students to create art projects based on the learning in your classroom. (Did I mention “In Memoriam: Wellington”? See my latest application of her lesson at <http://www.csun.edu/afye/documents/In-Memoriam-Wellington.pdf>)

Mary Riggs (Chicano/a Studies and University 100) has taught me about the importance of “Creating Instructional Conversations” by asking both display and referential questions. Display questions “are those with a known answer, and it is assumed that the instructor knows that answer. One student responds, while everyone else breathes a sigh of relief. Example: what is this year’s Freshman Common Reading book at CSUN? “Once this question is correctly answered, that’s the end of the interaction; it is a display of the student’s knowledge.” Referential questions can have “many different answers, some of which (or none of which) are known by the instructor. While one student might respond, all other students are engaged in thinking what their response might be. . . . Referential questions encourage an exchange of information and an ongoing instructional conversation.” Example: Name a CSUN colleague from whom you have learned something important about teaching.

Mary has also introduced me to two freshman-friendly approaches to classroom discussion:

1. Red Light, Green Light: a discussion game we will play now. After the application, you can look at the theory behind it: “The idea is that we can all observe everyone’s answer.” That means students interact with one another, engage both socially and intellectually in the material, and help you achieve the status of a “guide on the side” rather than “the sage on the stage.” Works particularly well with (simple) textbook exercises you’ve assigned for homework: students answer your yes/no, agree/disagree questions based on work they’ve already completed. You can conclude with a question that allows students to group themselves with others who have the same answers for a following activity.

2. **Priority Speakers:** Most of us have had a class in which one or two students dominate class discussion. They are eager to participate, love to talk, and want to be the first to respond to every question we ask. How do you get them to give others a chance? By assigning everyone in the class a role as either a “Priority Speaker” or a “Priority Listener.” As you know, both roles require particular skills, and both skill sets can be acquired and polished. Give students a brightly colored card associated with their assigned role for the day. Listeners must listen (and may even be asked to take notes); Speakers must speak. The ordinarily dominant talkers lack the color-coded card that is the ticket to speaking during this exercise. They will not dominate. The quiet, shy students know that they will be privileged participants. This is their special invitation to practice a skill that does not come naturally to them (just as your Priority Listeners have an opportunity to practice letting others talk first, for a change). Follow the exercise with a short debriefing during which students talk about what they learned. (Reinforce the lessons during this debriefing by helping the quiet students keep talking and helping the big talkers keep listening.)

Jennifer Romack (Kinesiology): Her brief article on “Enhancing Students’ Readiness to Learn” reminds us that while not every student was born (arrives on campus) ready, all can be helped to **get** ready. Make a rubric defining levels of readiness to match your class and your discipline. Have students fill out the rubric. Discuss. (Read the article.)

Merril Simon (Educational Psychology & Counseling) introduced me to student development theory, an entire sub-discipline that focuses on the many ways in which our freshmen are definitively adults-in-the-making (also known as “late adolescents”). That fact alone accounts for many of their more striking behavioral characteristics—perhaps most notably their desire to discover “the right answer” to every question and their corresponding aversion to multiplicity, relativism, and (alas) difference. For a slightly longer overview of William Perry’s scheme of intellectual and moral development (as it is known to those who know), see <http://www.cse.buffalo.edu/~rapaport/perry.positions.html> And don’t tell Merrill that I put her name in the same paragraph with my over-simplification of one of her specializations.

Cheryl Spector (University 100 and English):

1. Use icebreakers. There are hundreds; try to pick one that has course-related content or that can be adapted to include content from your course—that is, an icebreaker that is “educationally purposeful” (in Kathleen Gabriel’s words).
2. Try “Quote Strips”: I probably read about this somewhere; or perhaps I really invented it. It’s not rocket science. It is a variation on the well-known Jigsaw technique. Directions: pick one of your most complex assigned readings. Select several one-sentence passages that really require heavy thinking. Type the passages onto a sheet of paper using 18-font type (or 16: something big). Figure out how many small groups you want students to form; make that many copies of the sheet of paper and then use the department paper

cutter to create Quote Strips. All students in a small group get the same Quote Strip; they must unpack the quote and talk about its significance to the assigned reading. I always include the page number with each quote so students understand that they SHOULD look at the quote in context. When each group is ready, reconvene the class and let each Quote Strip group take the whole class through their quote. If the quotes follow the order of the argument in the reading, you may have just orchestrated an interactive lecture on the reading.

3. Use concrete objects (what K-12 math educators have called “manipulables”). Freshmen are young students. Although they are capable of abstract thinking, it does not come naturally to them. Scaffold them as they rise up from the mundane world of objects and things towards the heavenly goal of theories and concepts. Objects give them a place to start and (literally) something to hold on to.

Nisakorn Srichoom (Developmental Math): bring candy and high standards to every class meeting.

Maria Turnmeyer (Asian American Studies) reminds us of two 21st-century essentials:

1. Identity formation: freshmen may come to us with annoying certainties (“I’ve never been good at math and I’ll never be able to pass this class”) but also with many uncertainties, questions, and fears. They are amorphous and unclear about their own identity. So they need to form an identity in your classroom and to clarify the expectations you’re asking them to meet. Your early assignments should therefore include an opportunity for freshmen to write, however briefly, about their identity. Ask: who are you? (Meaning: how did you get to CSUN, who are your friends, what was your high school like.) And ask: what do you already know about _____? (Fill in the blank with the central topic of your course.) Students’ responses help you understand who you are dealing with and where you need to start as you set about the task of bringing them
2. Make friends with others in this program: meet your peers: post your photo and view pictures of the faculty etc
3. YouTube: though for some of us, YouTube has been a monumental time-waster, when used judiciously in the classroom—say, in two-minute bursts at the start of class once each week—a brief YouTube video can galvanize and focus class attention on whatever it is you want to begin with that day. You will have to locate the clip you want; but rumor has it that the campus is assembling a repository of educational YouTube clips already. (Don’t underestimate the value of the unexpected, either: “Who would have thought that Professor X would actually illustrate a point with YouTube?!?)

Use your resources:

A. Maybe you're a rookie at teaching freshmen, but you're teaching alongside a bunch of people who have a lot of experience. Some of them are here in this room right now. Others are incognito—disguised as CSUN staff or advisors. They can help you, and you should let them. I'm also available, and while I'm likely not a subject-matter expert in your field, I probably know someone who is. So ask me: Cheryl Spector, cheryl.spector@csun.edu or x3932.

B. The AFYE Library in CIELO (Sierra Hall 4th floor) has books about teaching freshmen; videos for freshmen; many, many, MANY “college success” texts in case you want to devote class time to cover some topic your class really needs (such as note-taking, active reading, time management, etc.). The Library list is online at the AFYE website: <http://www.csun.edu/afye/> (left column).

C. The University 100 student website at <http://www.csun.edu/univ100/> offers a lot of information and links of particular use to freshmen: where to print free on campus; a calendar of key events; the Learning Resource Center; Financial Aid info; Health Center virtual tour; advisors and advising; Ask Matty; etc.

Books (listed here in alphabetical order by author last name)

Available in CIELO, Sierra Hall fourth floor, as part of the Faculty Development Library:

http://www.csun.edu/facdev/resources_facDevLibrary.htm

and/or the Academic First Year Experiences Library, also in CIELO:

<http://www.csun.edu/afye/> (see left column for the link to the AFYE library list)

1. Bain, Ken. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004. Results of an extensive survey of “the best college teachers,” arranged by topic and concluding with an Epilogue titled “What Can We Learn from Them?”
2. Erickson, Bette LaSere, Calvin B. Peters, and Diane Weltner Strommer. *Teaching First-Year College Students: Revised and Expanded Edition of Teaching College Freshmen*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006. An extraordinarily practical and accessible book; perhaps the perfect place to begin expanding your own teaching repertoire. Excerpt:

“Discussing learning styles with students can [. . .] help them reflect on their approaches to learning. We do not advocate administering batteries of learning style inventories to students, although administering one or two that seem particularly relevant to a course or discipline can be a powerful entrée to discussing how to succeed in a program. An alternative to using published inventories asks students to respond to a series of questions:

- ✓ How do you think you learn best?
- ✓ What kind of activity or assignment do you find especially challenging?

- ✓ After reading the syllabus and attending the first class, which aspects of this course especially appeal to you?
- ✓ What are you unsure about?
- ✓ What do you dread, and why?
- ✓ How might I help you succeed in this course?

“Chapter Eleven offers suggestions for student self-reflection exercises and Chapter Fifteen includes a discussion of study strategy questionnaires as well as activities for initiating reflection and discussion with students.” (45)

3. Gabriel, Kathleen. *Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2008. A gem of a book, written by a CSU (Chico) faculty member. Extremely practical and accessible.

“At-risk students do not know what to do with a failed test. . . . On the other hand, when formative assessments are used, students are taught to use the feedback on their performance so they can make improvements before they have to take the test or turn in the paper. . . . All students can benefit from assessment activities, but at-risk students in particular benefit because frequent assessment and feedback helps *them* monitor their own progress more closely. . . . **Formative assessments help students meet high expectations.**” (89-90)

Two of my favorite parts: ways to place students in small groups (beyond having them count off) and why that is important; and getting students to create their own vocabulary cards.
4. Leamson, Robert. *Thinking about Teaching and Learning: Developing Habits of Learning with First Year College and University Students*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2001. A fascinating book which argues that we as faculty need to support students by helping them practice the mental, verbal, and other intellectual moves appropriate to collegiate reflection and learning. Excerpt:

“Typical college freshmen have had nineteen years to structure their brains [. . .] Some of what they have learned, however, is counterproductive. Many will have habits, of mind and body, quite inappropriate for the task they are about to undertake. In the case of first-year students, a prominent element of teaching might be thought of as a reconstructing of the student mind.” (35)

Or as Mary Riggs has said, “Use explicit teaching: ‘Now is a good time to take notes on this material.’”
5. Light, Richard J. *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001. A classic text, this collection of powerful anecdotes makes a compelling case for the importance of “co-curricular experiences” such as life in the dorms, participation in the band, joining a club, and mentoring (to name a few). Though Light’s students were Harvard undergraduates, as he points out, “This is not just a Harvard story. [. . .] the ideas and suggestions I present about teaching, advising, maximizing students’ engagement, and capitalizing on diversity apply” to a wide range of universities (11).
6. McKeachie, Wilbert J. *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 11th (or any other) edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. McKeachie’s classic work offers a practical and beautifully arranged overview of ways to engage students and improve classroom teaching.

Links

Available as links on the Crash Course 2010 web page: <http://www.csun.edu/afye/Crash-Course-for-Faculty-Teaching-Freshmen-Fall-2010.html>

7. [Advisors at CSUN for Freshmen: Who, Where, How to Contact Them](#). Each student may also have an individual advisor listed in the portal, if you want to look there using the student's ID number.
8. [Beloit College Mindset List for the Class of 2014](#). "Each August since 1998, Beloit College has released the Beloit College Mindset List. It provides a look at the cultural touchstones that shape the lives of students entering college this fall."
9. [CSU Proficiency Reports](#). Readiness and remediation across the CSU.
10. [CSUN Catalog](#). Searchable.
11. [CSUN "Current Students" Page](#).
12. [Disruptive Students: Guide for Faculty](#).
13. [Faculty Development Library Database](#). Listed by title, author, and topics: books and articles to help you think about teaching.
14. [Institutional Research at CSUN](#). Offers specialized and accessible reports on CSUN freshmen including registration progress, continuation (retention) rates, graduation rates, results of the most recent National Survey of Student Engagement, the Freshman Survey (CIRP), and several other reports and data sets of consuming interest.
15. [New Student Orientation Schedule for First-Time Freshmen](#). Includes an overview of topics students heard and expected learning outcomes.
16. *Teaching Unprepared Students*: [book group page](#) with resources for faculty.
17. "Understanding and Supporting the Learning Process for First Generation College Students at CSUN": <http://www.csun.edu/afye/Teaching-First-Generation-Students.html> Site includes additional resources and a very helpful handout prepared by Lideth Ortega Villalobos, PhD (CSUN Counseling Center).
18. [University 100 Home Page](#). Intended for freshman students. Includes useful links and a calendar of events.
19. [When Students Don't Do the Reading, What Can You Do?](#)
20. "Enhancing Students' Readiness to Learn" by Jennifer Romack. *The Teaching Professor* (1 Oct. 2006). This CSUN colleague offers a useful approach to helping students understand your expectations.